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Painted by Nina Vakueva



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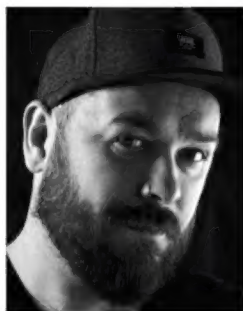


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Welcome to... NO.1 FOR DIGITAL ARTISTS **ImagineFX**



This month we dive into the world of book illustration – including an in-depth look into how the talented Fernanda Suarez created our stunning cover with an expert tutorial. Be sure to fold out the issue so you can see the art in all its glory across the front and back!

We also explore the art of picture books, speaking with a variety of artists who are focused on creating gorgeous image-first titles for their advice on how you can get into the speciality too.

For the anime lovers out there, check out our behind-the-scenes feature on Sakamoto Days, one of the latest manga series to transition to screens in animated form. We spoke to character designer Yo Moriyama to find out just how it was done.

There's plenty more skills to learn in this issue too! The inked look is always popular, so head over to page 72 to learn how Matt Sanz creates game concepts with comic style in Photoshop. And for traditional artists, see page 92 to discover how Carlos Cabrera mixes mediums for powerful art.

Enjoy the issue!

Rob

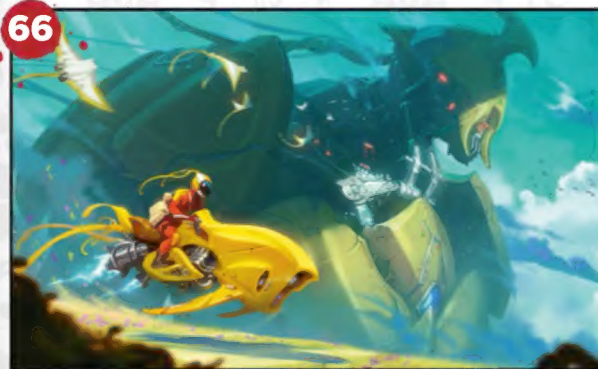
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EDITOR'S CHOICE Three of my top picks this month...



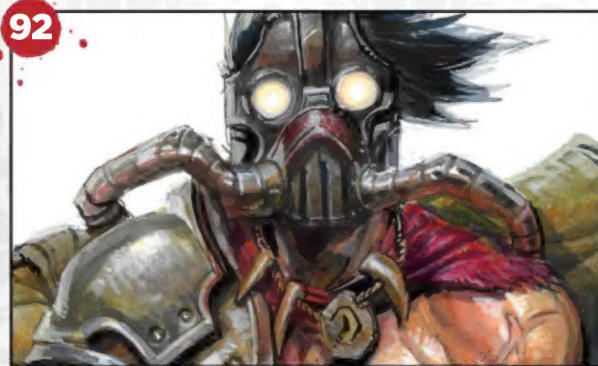
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92 Mix mediums for powerful images

Break out your watercolours, inks and markers to follow along with Carlos Cabrera's barbaric project.

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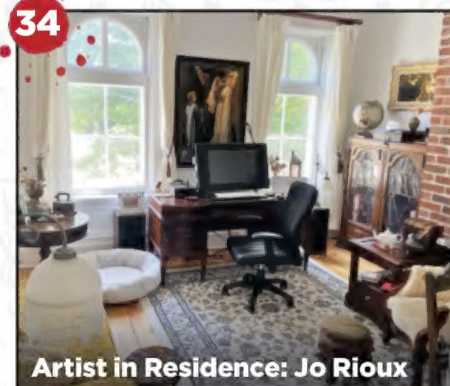
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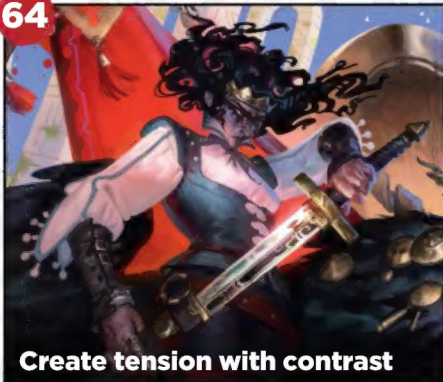
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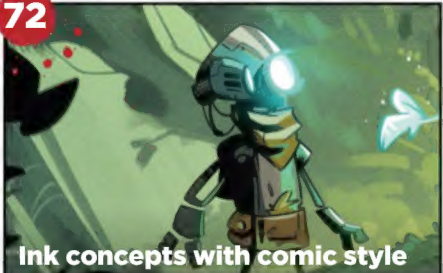
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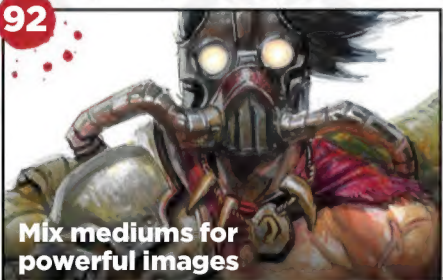
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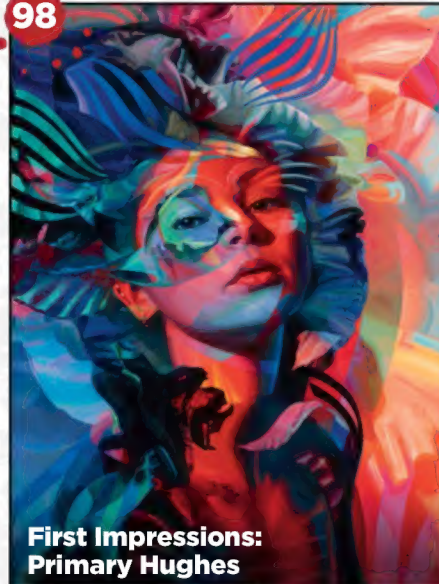
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Next month



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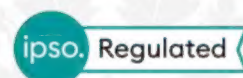
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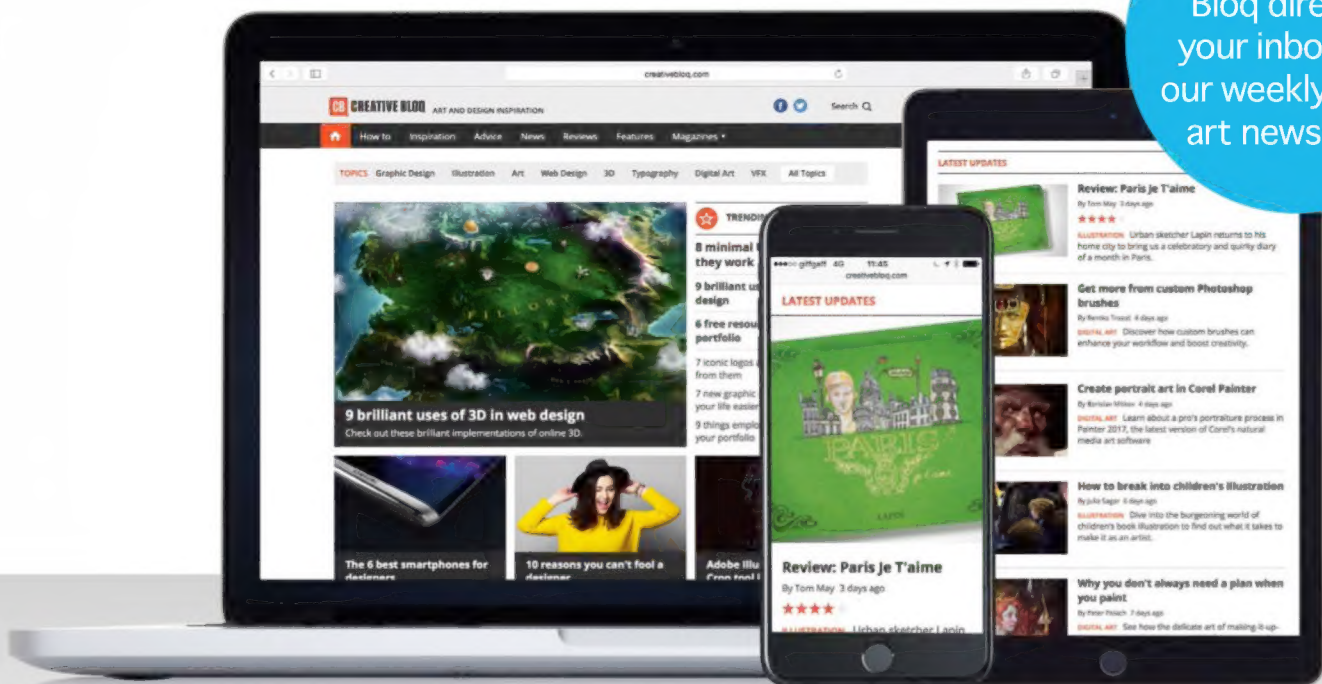
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FXPosé

THE PLACE TO SHARE YOUR DIGITAL ART



Wencke Schaper

LOCATION: Germany MEDIA: Procreate WEB: www.instagram.com/rakasademon

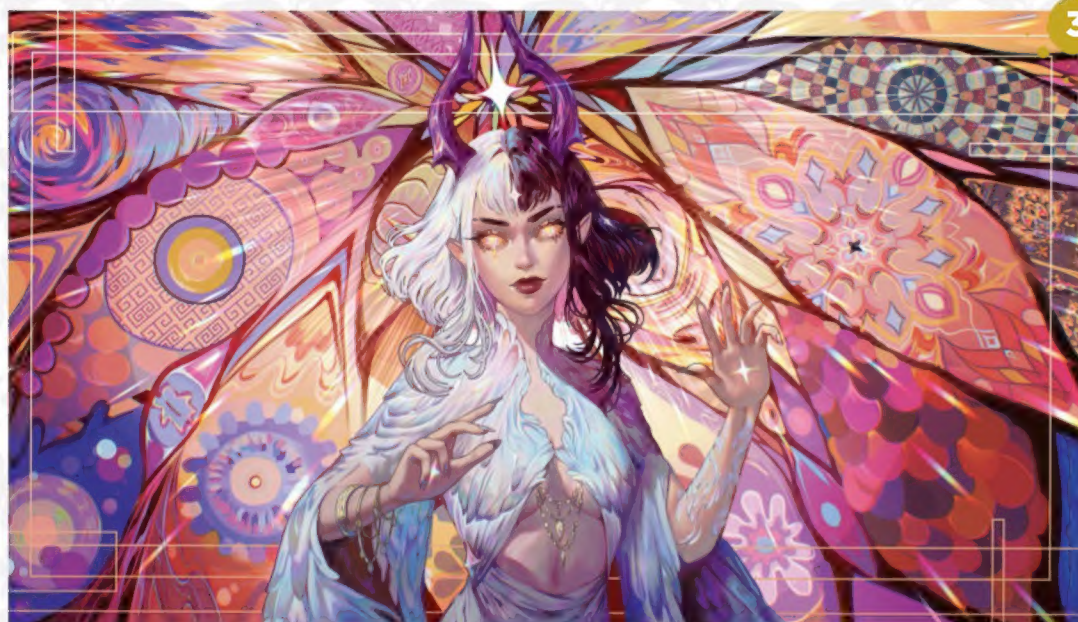
Wencke wants to celebrate the beauty of life in her artwork, which she expresses through heavy use of colours and patterns. Most of her inspiration comes from other artists, nature and life itself.

1 THE SUN

"A painting that uses a lot of textures, gradient maps and inverted colours to create a very interesting and vibrant effect."

2 TAKE CONTROL

"This painting is inspired by the Japanese technique of kintsugi, where broken pottery is mended with gold-dusted lacquer to make it more valuable. This concept can apply to humans too."



3 LEADING STAR

"This was my first illustration of 2025. I tried to channel all of my positive hopes and aspirations into it and let it lead my art forward into a successful year."

4 TRANQUIL

"A fan-shaped shadow on a wall was the inspiration for this painting. The contrast between the bright and dark colours helped to create a lot of depth in the piece."



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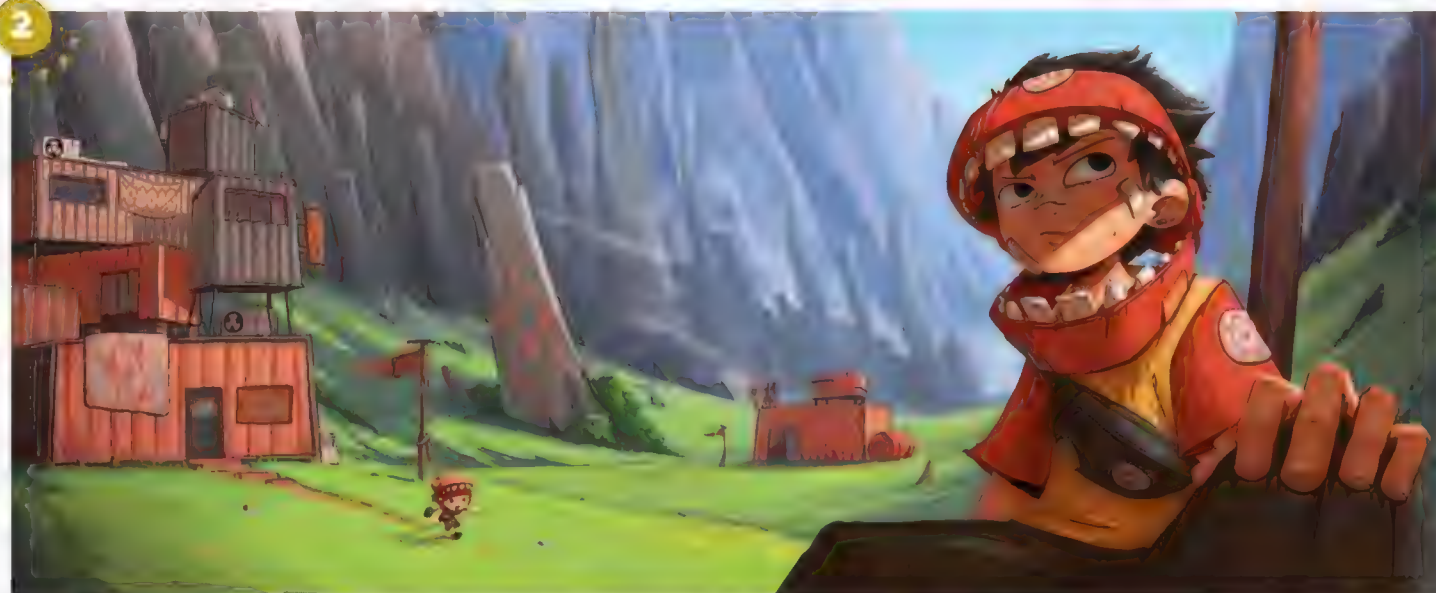




Alcoun

LOCATION: Belgium MEDIA: Procreate WEB: www.instagram.com/alcoun_draw

Alcoun is an illustrator and animator who has worked digitally for the last seven years. They specialise in creating artwork with strong, vibrant colours depicting anime characters living in a dystopian trash world.



1 BACKFIRE

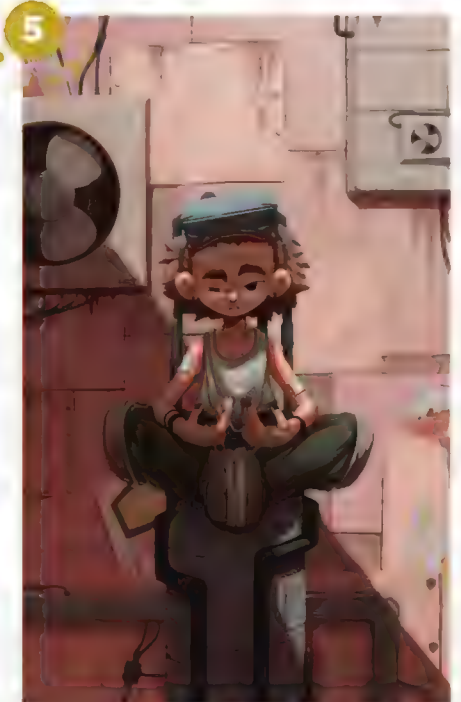
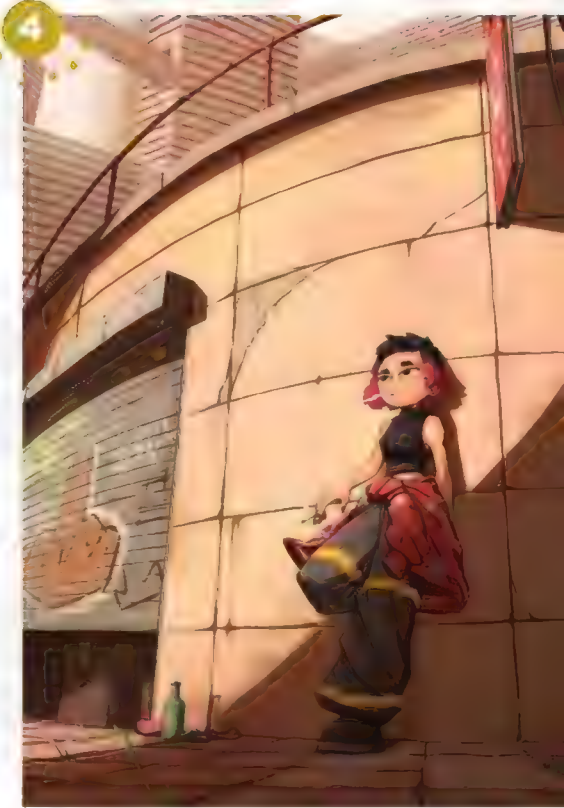
"This is my character Kala. I tried a more comic book style with strong black lines and a slightly pared-back render in this one."

2 HELMET CHILDREN

"My latest digital piece. I challenged myself to draw nature and grass in a chilled out, contemplative work. The concept of a group of children who live in the mountains with their own culture really pleases me."

3 NO AI

"I was overwhelmed by AI art trends, so I wanted to make a protest against them with a character painting this symbol. I think it's important to show a human creating with their own hands."



4 BREATH

"Another image of Kala, who's taking a break from her awful job in a trashy city. I wish I could tell you more about her!"

5 MESS

"I wanted to mix spirituality with technology. I really vibe with those themes so I created this weird scene featuring a monk meditating amid a mess of cables and machines."





Tessa Nelissen

LOCATION: Norway MEDIA: Procreate WEB: www.instagram.com/jessali_tn

Tessa is a Dutch illustrator who specialises in cute and colourful characters plus scenery, often containing cats. When she's not creating illustrations, character art and comics, she indulges in her passion for sustainability.

1 BALANCE

"Two cats playing together in a field of flowers. Adding a little feline twist on the classic yin and yang symbol."



2 MOODS

"These characterful cats are expressing a range of emotions. Which of their moods do you most relate to today?"



3 SILLY KITTIES

"An experimental piece that started with putting down large graphic shapes, then transforming them into cats."

4 BLUE

"I saw this kimono pattern somewhere and decided to draw a character wearing it. The cats and birds were added to give it a cute factor."





Svetoslav Petrov

LOCATION: Bulgaria MEDIA: Photoshop

WEB: www.artstation.com/svetoslavpetrov

Svetoslav is a concept artist and illustrator across movies, comics and games. As well as lending his talents to projects such as Dungeons & Dragons, Phoenix Point and Chaos Reborn, he has lectured part-time.

1 THE BAT AND THE BELL

"The bell is guarded by a giant bat who was once a great hero, but has now fallen prey to an evil curse."



2 GOBLIN HR

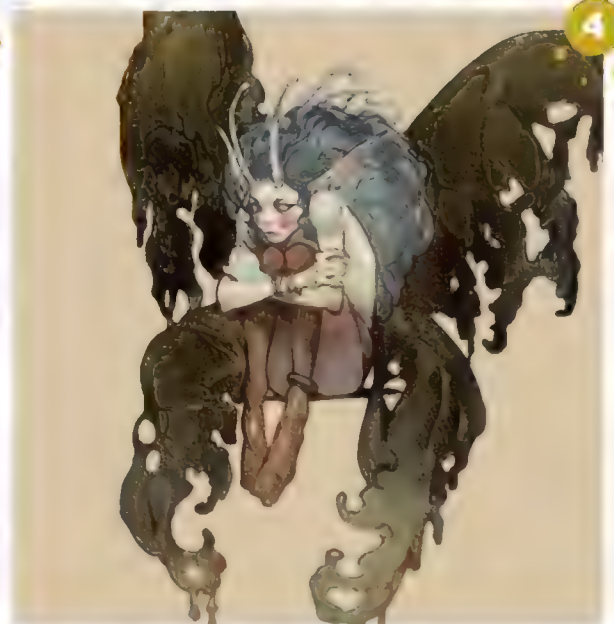
"This piece was made into a prize playmat for the Magic: The Gathering tournament in Bologna, Italy."

3 LORD SKROLK

"I absolutely love the lore of the Warhammer world, so I channelled its curses and magic into this piece."

4 FAERIE MACABRE

"I first fell in love with fantasy art in high school after discovering Magic: The Gathering. I've always dreamed of making a living through my art ever since then."





Andrew Russell

LOCATION: Scotland MEDIA: Photoshop, Sketchbook Pro WEB: <https://andrewrussellart.com>

Originally from South Africa, Andrew's artistic journey began as a child. Since discovering concept art, he has been inspired by the likes of Wesley Burt and Karl Kopinski. Andrew also mentors artists to share his knowledge.

1 PRIESTESS

"An older piece but one of my favourites. I used my background of African and Indian influences to design this one, so it's a special artwork for me."

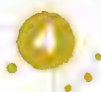
2 WARRIOR

"I got into inks thanks to Wesley Burt, perhaps a surprisingly left-field choice for some, but his sketchbook inks really blew me away. I'm still trying to reach his standards, but he's easily my biggest inspiration."

3 SOLDIER

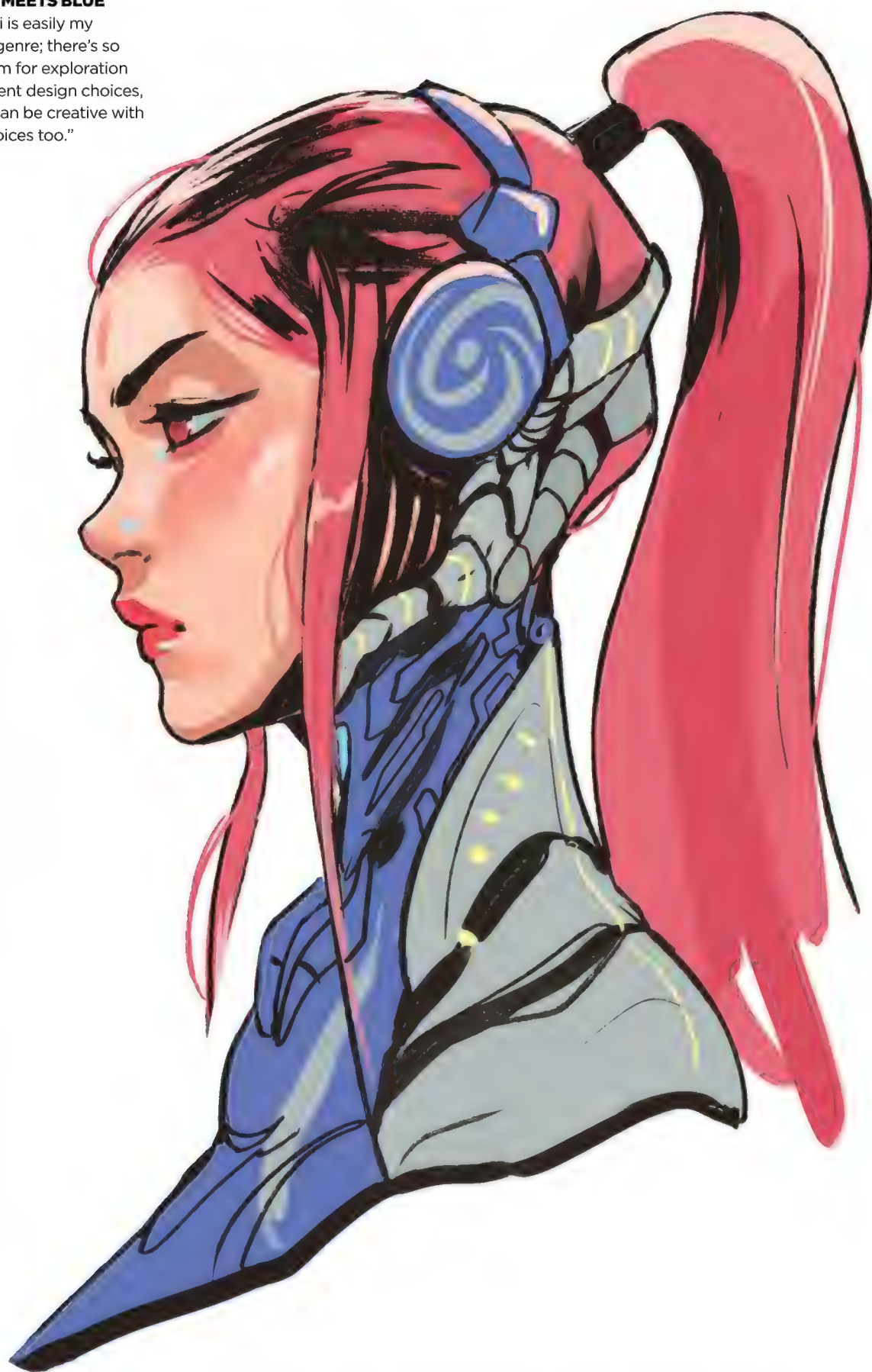
"I'm a massive Yoji Shinkawa fan. I'd studied a lot of his work when I made this one. He's been a huge influence on my art."





4 PINK MEETS BLUE

"Sci-fi is easily my favourite genre; there's so much room for exploration and different design choices, plus you can be creative with colour choices too."





Rich Carey

LOCATION: Japan **MEDIA:** Procreate, Clip Studio Paint **WEB:** www.artstation.com/richardcarey101

Rich is a character and creature concept artist who has worked on AAA games like Total War: Warhammer, Mortal Kombat 11 and Fortnite. His style fuses western art and anime, topped with inspiration from the Zelda games.

1 INFERISECT SERIES: DEVIL OF MANIPULATION

"A piece from my Inferisect project. She bends humans to her will with her playful charms."

2 THE ANGEL

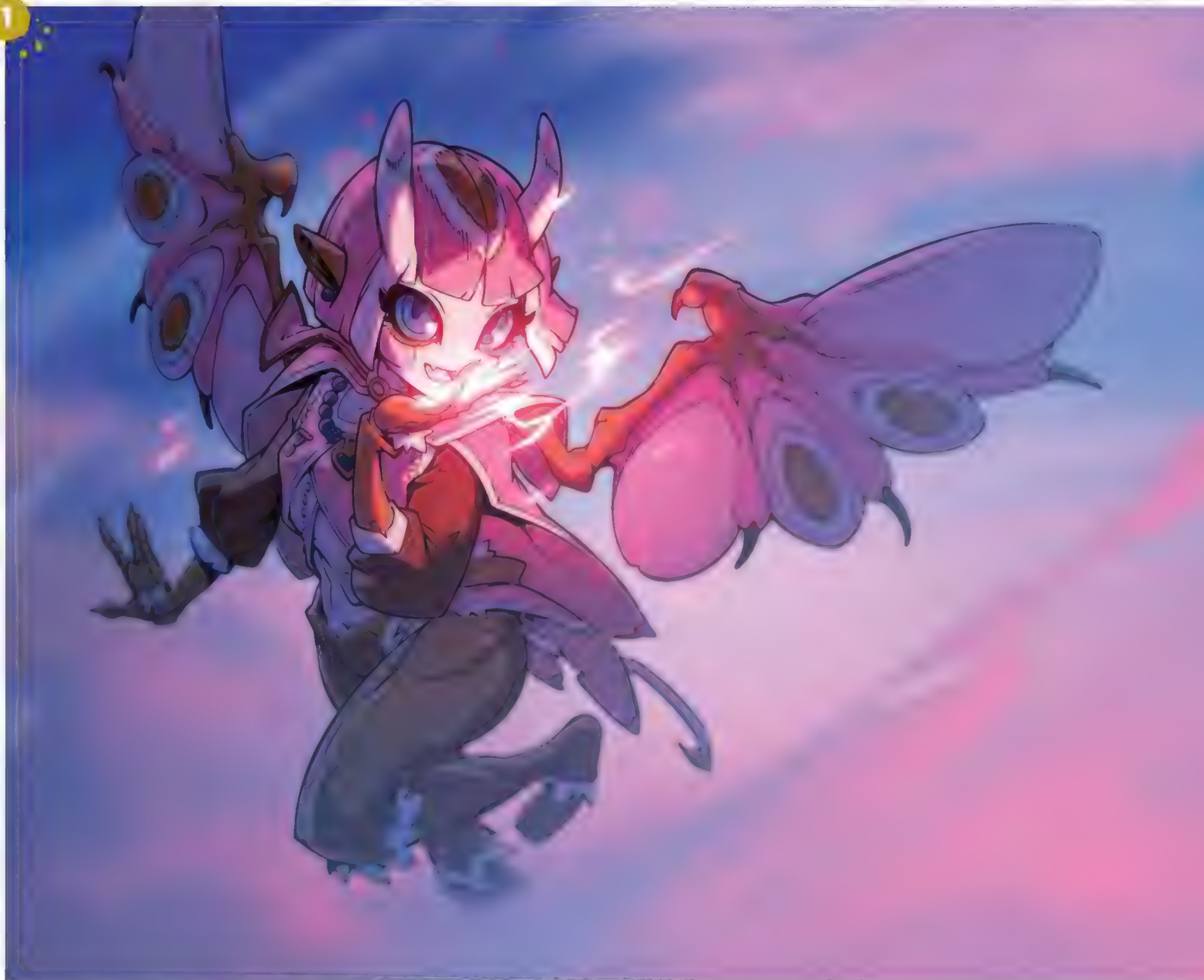
"A corrupted Aarakocra transmuter wizard who's also a cult leader. This was the final boss of my old D&D campaign."

3 CAPTAIN SOARIN

"This is a Korean-inspired Aarakocra kensei monk from a D&D campaign, in which they acted as a quest giver."

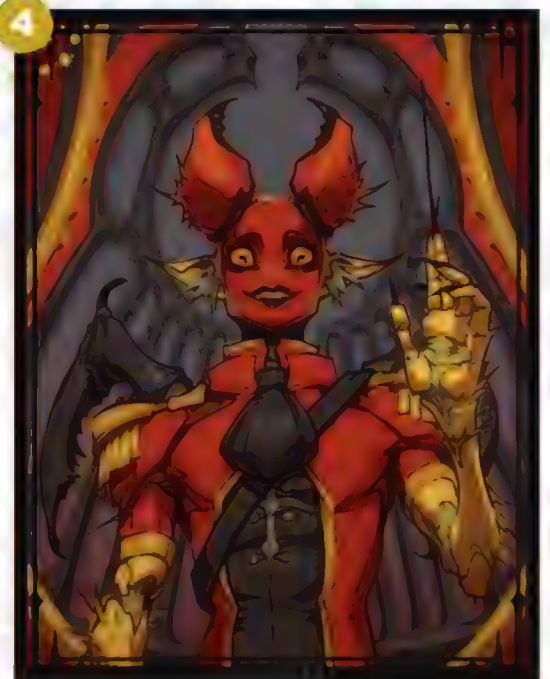
4 INFERISECT SERIES: DEVIL OF PUNISHMENT

"Another personal creation. This character takes pleasure in punishing those that deserve it."



Do you want to see your art on these pages? Then email five pieces of your work and a short explanation about each artwork, along with a photo and a few details about yourself, to fxpose@imaginefx.com

2





THE ROOKIES

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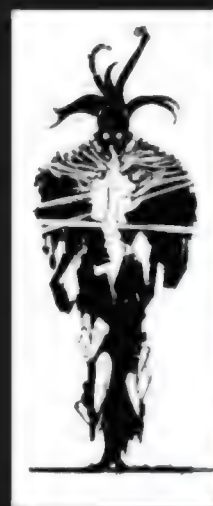
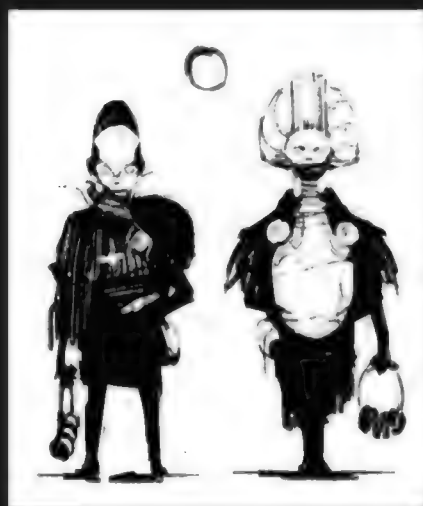


SongHai: character concept art

YEAR CREATED: 2024 MEDIA: Photoshop

"SongHai was born from a fascination with how humanity adapts to living and coexisting in extreme environments. By merging African tribal culture with deep-sea hydrothermal ecosystems, I aimed to explore resilience, survival and the harmony between tradition and nature, while crafting a world that honours both cultural heritage and speculative imagination."





Artist PROFILE

Songyu Liu

LOCATION: US



Songyu Liu is a concept artist who finds their inspiration in overlooked details and the natural world, believing that curiosity fuels creativity and drives progress in both design and culture.

www.therookies.co/projects/82593

Mikey's artwork for Rene and Glumfoot is inspired by Raymond Briggs and Grimm's Fairy Tales.



What artists need to know to break into picture books

Picture this The rise of image-led books presents artists with unique opportunities – **Dominic Carter** discovers how to enter their world

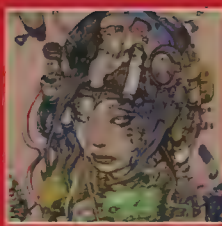
Until relatively recently, the craft of making a picture book has been somewhat overlooked. Despite the enduring popularity of greats such as Maurice Sendak, Beatrix Potter and Raymond Briggs to name but a few, the medium has fought an uphill struggle to shake off a historically uncool reputation.

Thankfully, their fortunes are on the up. Agile publishers and champions of the form have raised the profile of picture books to new heights, and the stunning works of contemporary authors such as Shaun Tan, Beatrix



DUO REVEAL NEW COMIC

Robert Kirkman and David Finch team up for 'brutal' comic Skinbreaker. Plus, all the latest details on Rebelle 8 and a new Marvel-DC crossover. **Page 30**



ECCENTRIC MANGA ART

We meet Japanese artist Katsuya Terada, who explains how he came to blur the lines of manga and what artistic challenges await in the future. **Page 32**



EXPLORE A REGAL STUDIO

Illustrator Jo Rioux tells the story behind her grand Victorian-style studio, gives an insight into her daily work and introduces a canine companion. **Page 34**



© Mkey Pease 2025

“The picture book maker could be closely compared to a singer-songwriter”

Alemagna and Jon Klassen have been exposing audiences of all ages to their incredible potential.

For artists, picture books allow them to tell stories in a way that no other medium can match. Combining the dual disciplines of art and writing, the life of a picture book maker may be precarious at times, but its rewards far outweigh the challenges.

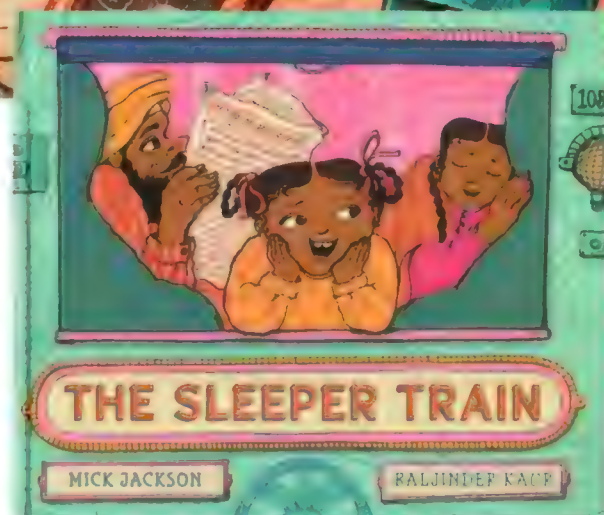
DEFINING THE FORM

Illustrated books come in all shapes and sizes, so defining exactly what a picture book is will help out aspiring



artists on their journey. **Prof. Martin Salisbury**, the illustrator who founded the renowned Children's Book Illustration masters course at Anglia Ruskin University's Cambridge School of Art, is perfectly positioned to clarify.

“In a picture book, the words and pictures combine to deliver meaning,” the academic explains. “Typically, neither word nor image would make sense if experienced in isolation from the other. It's a sort of duet really, or perhaps the picture book maker ➡



© Baljinder Kaur

For Professor Martin Salisbury, good drawing is at the heart of picture books. “No amount of trickery or technical wizardry will replace the ability to draw.”

© Mikey Please 2025



Unlike his work designed for adults, Mikey depicts human faces in his books for children.



"The nature of illustration means we're always considering our specific audience," says Zoe.

➡➡ can be closely compared to a singer-songwriter.

"By contrast, in illustrated books the words would usually make perfect sense when read on their own. The images are there to augment or enrich the reader's experience, giving them a visual accompaniment or backdrop that avoids duplicating what the words are saying."

Picture books pull in creatives from all backgrounds thanks to their format. "I've always been fascinated with the art form of a picture book; they feel like miniature films where the author/illustrator gets to play all of the roles of a production – from script to



worldbuilding to final art," says **Aaron Becker**, who spent the first 10 years of his career working as a concept illustrator at

Robert Zemeckis's film production company under the watchful art direction of Doug Chiang.

"Picture books have this magical thing called a page turn, which is a physical process the reader must make when they're ready to find out what happens next," he adds. "I think this leads to a level of engagement and immersion that more passive entertainment lacks. The reader must decipher images' details and decide on the pace of the story's progression. The best picture books always have a moment of delight after each turn."

APPEALING TO AUDIENCES

As well as being a varied creative outlet, picture books also fulfil an important role better than most other genres. "They're great for helping children explore complex topics, work through difficult situations, stimulate



their imaginations, and connect with the adults in their lives," says illustrator **Zoe Damoulakis**. "There are times when it's just



"We're connected, everything and everyone," says Grahame. "That's what drew me towards creating children's books."



Chris Van Allsburg's book *The Wreck of the Zephyr* was a formative influence on Aaron's creative outlook.

“I’ve always been fascinated with the art form... Picture books feel like mini films”

about having a giggle or winding down before bed. These things feel more important now than ever."

Meanwhile, picture books offer a way to combat declining literacy levels and the ability of young people



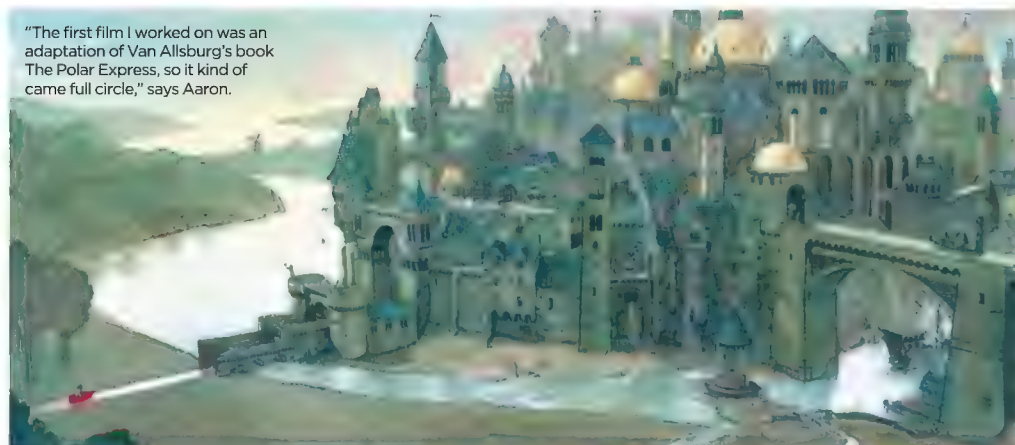
to concentrate, says

Grahame Baker-Smith.

"When I read to my children, it was a lovely intimate and bonding

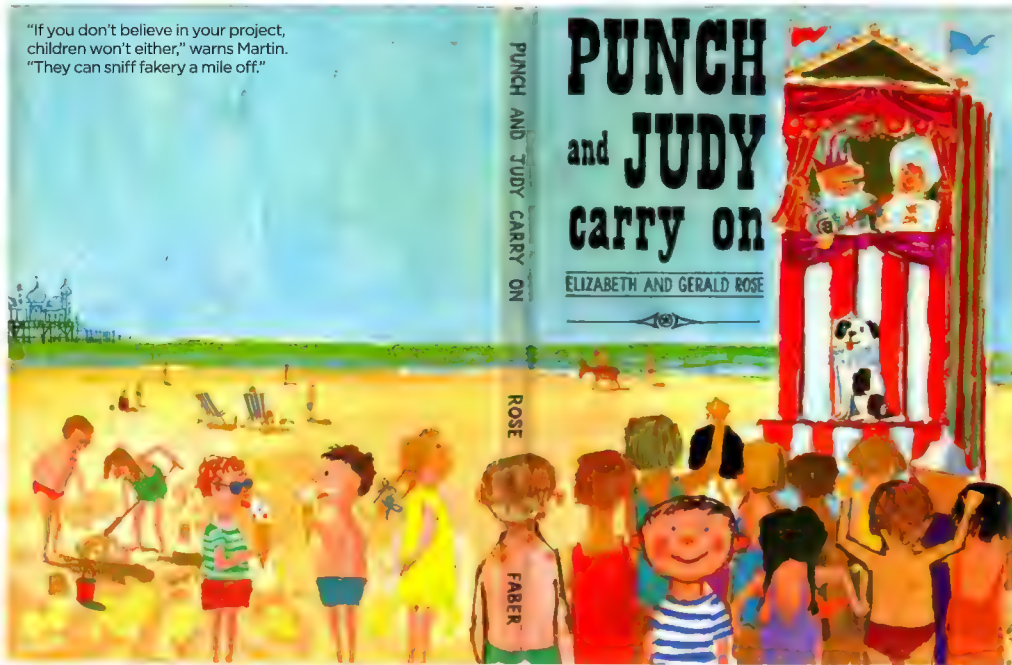
time at the end of the day," explains the illustrator. "We could read slow or fast, go back and forth as we liked, linger over a much-loved passage or picture, smell the ink on the page, and feel the weight of them in our hands. We were in charge of the process."

"Stopping a book is not the same as pausing a video. A film gives you all you need to know about movement, at 24 frames at a time. But the ➡➡



"The first film I worked on was an adaptation of Van Allsburg's book *The Polar Express*, so it kind of came full circle," says Aaron.

© Illustrations 1962 Gerald Rose. Courtesy of the Gerald Rose estate



INDUSTRY INSIGHT PROF. MARTIN SALISBURY

There are many ways to become part of the picture book story...

How does studying your course prepare artists for making picture books?

As a postgraduate masters course in a university, we strive to effectively combine the academic with the vocational. We like to say we're industry focused but not industry led. Our Children's Book Illustration masters is set up to help students work towards a genuine personal visual language, to bring new, meaningful art to the world rather than a mere set of skills.

Are there alternative ways into the industry?

There is an ever-increasing number of private picture book courses – online as well as short on-site courses. Of course, the standard varies and it's difficult to generalise. But I would advise against expecting short courses to deliver instant results. If the course is good, the tutors will advise the longer-term needs of the student if they are to build a truly genuine personal way of working with solid foundations. Avoid courses that propose to help you "find your own style".

How should picture book makers approach publishers?

This is the tricky bit. Our own students are fortunate in that publishers flock to the annual graduation show and to our stand at the Bologna Children's Book Fair to fight over graduate work. But for most, the hardest part is getting your work seen. I recommend entering as many competitions as possible, like the Macmillan Prize or The Batsford Prize. Build a strong Instagram presence. You may also consider trying to find an agent.



Illustrator Prof. Salisbury is also founder of Anglia Ruskin University's masters course in Children's Book Illustration.

<https://bit.ly/4eRkwOr>



© Mikey Presse 2025



"Constraint is always part of illustrating for a client," says Zoe. "It's problem solving!"



"Some things work, some won't," Grahame says. "That's life, that's what teaches you the next step and what gives you the next idea."

© Oliver Jeffers



Martin suggests making picture books lean.
"Maurice Sendak described them as 'visual poems.'"

➡ movement, and therefore the life, in a book happens between the turn of a page, and then only if you put in something yourself that exercises your imagination."

Picture books don't have to target younger readers exclusively though.



Author and illustrator **Mikey Please** explains how to appeal to different age groups. "I think that children are looking for an immersive world, whereas adults want to create their own," he says. "They generally don't want to be spoon-fed so much, particularly in the context of illustrations inside a novel, as is the case with my book *The Expanded Earth*. I had to be sensitive not to disrupt the internal picture forming in the reader's mind. I don't think adult readers want to be told stories in the same way. Quite rightly, they want to come to their own conclusions."

ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

Compared to other creative markets, picture books have a certain anarchy to them that can accommodate a broad range of artists. For creators looking to get into them, Zoe still recommends nailing down the fundamental skills of drawing and painting. "I'd advise you to avoid getting fixated on these though, and remember that the tools are there to serve your storytelling and that you're allowed to break the rules," she says. "Collect a wide variety of artwork that you love and investigate why they



"It has cost me at times to create picture books, but I carry on because I don't want to do anything else," says Grahame.



© Mikey Please 2025

appeal to you so you can get in touch with your own aesthetic.

"Take a look at your own wider interests, background and the things that excite you, and respond to these. Start making work straight away even if the results aren't satisfying to you immediately – you'll learn quicker by doing rather than by thinking."

One common theme among the artists we spoke to, however, is to avoid worrying about the 'S' word: style. "Your own creative voice will emerge naturally as you produce more and more work," Zoe continues. Grahame agrees: "Concentrate on the

Capturing the exact moment with all of the relevant information and energy is difficult. "It can take countless attempts," says Mikey.

© Mikey Please 2025



"In *The Expanded Earth*, I tried to avoid directly rendering any exact moments from the story, instead giving a glimpse," Mikey adds.

thing you most want to do, the thing that is in you to do. The style will come naturally out of your experience of life, your own artistic interests and your integrity. It will come from the subject matter and it will – or it should if you don't fixate on it – evolve naturally throughout your career."

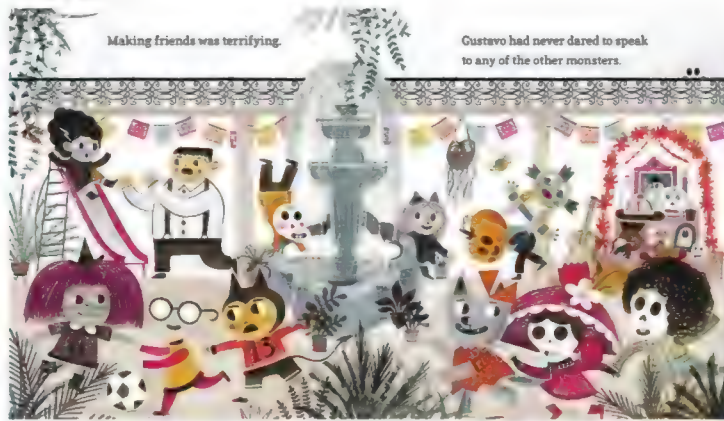
Mikey's enthusiasm for picture books also provides an insight into how to approach them from a story perspective. "Long before the daily kids' bedtime reading routine, I collected picture books for myself, just for the succinct, joyful bullets of artistry that they are," he reveals. "It's extremely difficult to tell a good story with no fat, but that works within this limited format. So when they land, it can be a magnificent feeling. You can get a lot out of a great picture book for putting not a lot in. ●

“Before my kids, I collected picture books for myself just for the succinct, joyful bullets of artistry that they are”

Artist news, software & events



© Flavia Zorila Drago

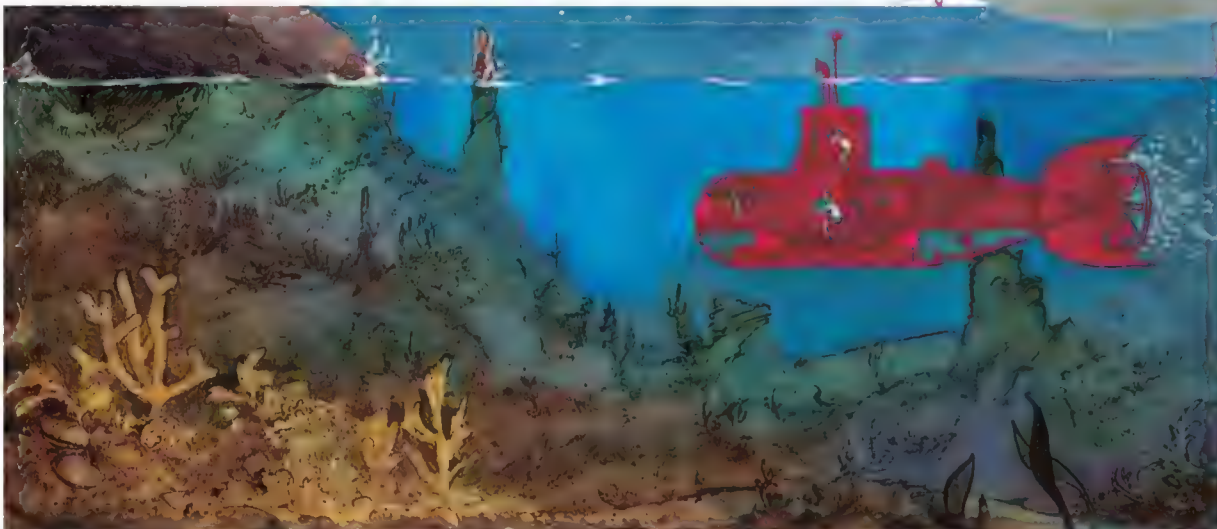


Martin points out that picture books are often 32-pages long. "The planning process has lots of storyboarding to view the book at once on a single sheet."

"Don't be too precious about ideas; take the time to understand the form," advises Aaron.



"It's important not to be influenced exclusively by illustration. I cultivate a wider pool of interests to keep my approach fresh," says Zoe.



"At their heart, picture books are meant to be shared between a caregiver and child," says Aaron. "This is the stuff of human bonding that keeps our society together."

When two tribes go to war

Skin deep Renowned comic artist David Finch teams up with The Walking Dead writer Robert Kirkman to release 'unrelentingly brutal' comic series Skinbreaker

This September sees the launch of the hotly anticipated survival comic **Skinbreaker** – a brutal, emotional new series from legendary writer **Robert Kirkman** (*Invincible*, *The Walking Dead*) and Eisner Award-winning artist **David Finch** (*Batman*, *New Avengers*).

"I've wanted to work with David for the entirety of my career," says Robert. "We've gotten close many times over the years, but we wanted our collaboration to be truly special. **Skinbreaker** is that series – it's a high-water mark for both of our careers.

"The comic is an action epic that's unrelentingly brutal, but packed with emotion and heart. David is one of the greatest comic artists to ever live. His work on this series has to be seen to



An oversized commemorative Treasury Edition of **Skinbreaker** #1 will also be available.

be believed. It would be impossible for us to overhype it."

The eight-part series follows Enor, a fading tribal chieftain, and his reluctant heir Anok, as they fight for survival in a collapsing world filled with savage creatures, violent power struggles and ancient traditions. At the centre of it all lies the mysterious **Skinbreaker**, Enor's mighty weapon, and its role in shaping their world.

Readers can expect intense, bone-crushing battles alongside a

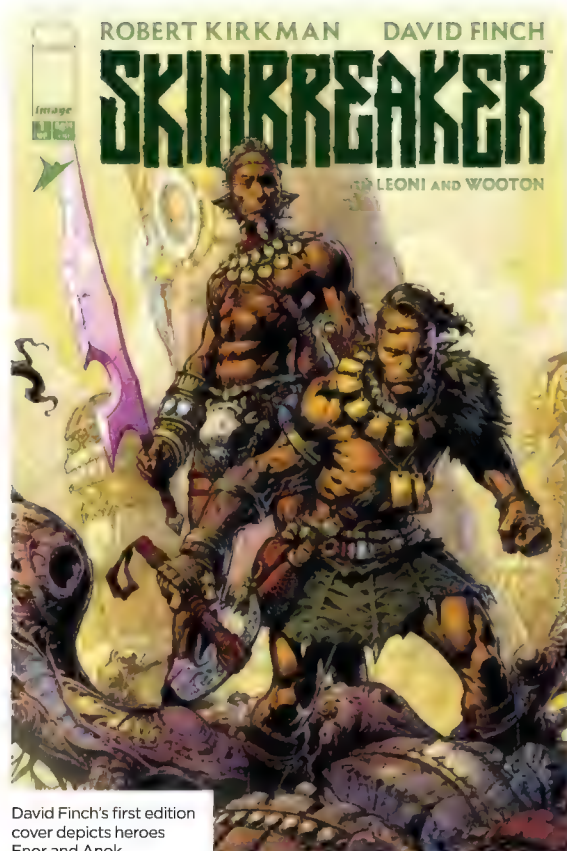
surprisingly heartfelt story that's all brought to life with Finch's dynamic and detailed art, plus Annalisa Leoni's powerful colours.

"**Skinbreaker** is a labour of love," says David. "It's a story that resonated deeply with me, and it's been the privilege of my career to help bring it to life. Everyone involved has put every last ounce of effort into this book and I couldn't be prouder."

Alongside Finch's main cover, the debut issue will feature a selection of stunning variant covers from guest artists including Ryan Ottley, Lorenzo De Felici, Eric Canete and Tony Moore. Collectors can also expect a host of premium editions, including a 1:1,000 CGC signed and graded foil cover, a die-cut foil mask variant, and a rare 1:2,500 Finch original art sketch cover signed by both creators.

Skinbreaker #1 will be available at comic book shops on 24 September, or via www.skybound.com and <http://imagecomics.com>.

“David’s work on this series has to be seen to be believed. It’s impossible to overhype”



David Finch's first edition cover depicts heroes Enor and Anok.



Rus Wootton brings his comic lettering expertise to the book.



Variant cover artists Eric Canete (top) and Ryan Ottley add their own interpretations of the story.

Rebelle update unveiled

Simulation sensation A new version of the much-loved painting software promises increased realism with its upcoming release

Rebelle 8 will bring more than 40 new features to its toolset when it launches in the coming months, Escape Motions has revealed

The traditional medium-mimicking software has earned itself a devoted userbase since first launching 10 years ago, giving artists the tools to simulate watercolours, acrylics, oils and more. The new version – set to launch for Windows and macOS at the end of Q3 – will bring powerful new Bristle Brushes, realistic oil shading and



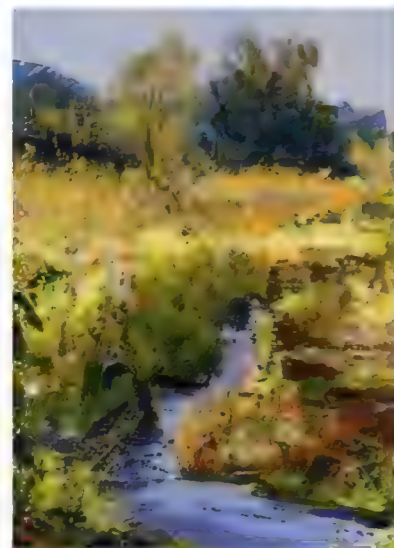
Rebelle 8 will be available in standard and Pro versions.

expanded professional tools among its raft of enhancements.

Realism has been put to the fore, particularly with the addition of Bristle Brushes. These are based on particles that imitate individual brush strands for the most authentic textures yet. Elsewhere, the RealShader creates photorealistic lighting and impasto textures for oil painting, while the SoftShadows feature lets artists paint with live shadows and natural light depth without the need for a PC with a dedicated GPU.

The NanoPixel technology that was introduced in Rebelle 5, which could enlarge paintings without suffering a loss of detail, has received an upgrade to NanoPixel 2. Details are now even clearer and images can be resized and exported at up to 32K resolution.

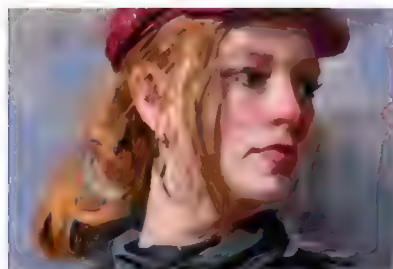
Further enhancements in Rebelle 8 include boosted performance when



The impasto look is just one of the many traditional techniques made possible by the software.

using larger brushes up to 3,000px, a brand new Symmetry tool and real-time canvas changes, plus much more.

Rebelle 8 will launch at \$89.99 with the Pro version at \$149.99. Existing Rebelle 7 users can get a 50 per cent discount on an upgrade, with those who purchased after 28 May 2025 able to upgrade for free.



Georg Ireland uses Rebelle to paint his wonderfully textured portrait pieces.

Variant covers steal the show in crossover comic

Unlikely duo Fans are drooling as Marvel and DC join forces in the first of two series partnering Batman with Deadpool

A few months ago, Marvel and DC released their first comic covers for the Deadpool/Batman series, and it's safe to say fans were pretty hyped. With legendary artists and writers from both comic book titans on board, things are undoubtedly in good hands, a fact the new variant covers have only confirmed.

From the iconic character design down to the immaculate details, each variant has its own unique appeal, showcasing diverse art styles and paying homage to some iconic covers. They might be an unconventional pair, but the Deadpool/Batman crossover comics are already a winner thanks to this artwork alone.

Created by Mark Bagley, Ryan Stegman and Skottie Young, each



Ryan Stegman's cover (top) paid tribute to the epic Incredible Hulk #340 cover artwork.

variant cover takes a distinct spin on the comic. With a cartoony approach, Skottie's design features a playful shot of Deadpool commandeering the Bat-Signal, while Mark's design features the duo in a heated face-off against the Joker. Ryan's design was a homage to The Incredible Hulk #340, replacing Wolverine with a ferocious batarang-clawed Batman.

The series, which goes on sale 17 September, has been written by Zeb Wells, who has previously written for Spider-Man, with the influential Greg Capullo crafting the art. "This is likely to be the high point of my career, and I've had a great career," Capullo says. "The idea I get to do a crossover with Deadpool and Batman – if I'm dreaming, don't wake me!"



The series is the first of two crossovers featuring the duo, with DC producing another in November.



This isn't Greg Capullo's first time working with Deadpool, having drawn for 1991's X-Force.

Deadpool/Batman © 2025 DC Comics and Marvel Characters, Inc.

The path of... Katsuya Terada

Blurred lines Known for his offbeat manga, the artist shares his journey

Where did you grow up and how has this influenced your art?

I was born and raised in Tamano, in western Japan's Okayama Prefecture. Growing up outside a bustling city before the internet era made me acutely aware of the distance to the emerging cultures in faraway places. This sense of distance was what shaped my fundamental desire to go somewhere that isn't here.

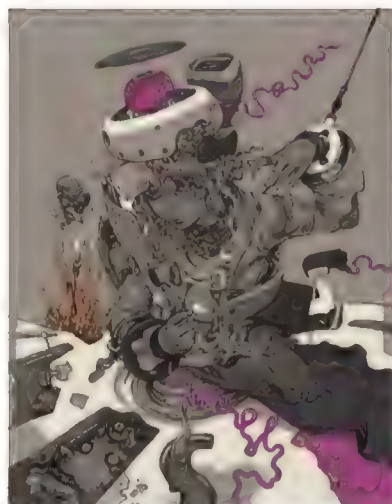
I can recall one particular piece that inspired me: an illustration by the French comic artist Moebius I saw in a magazine when I was 15 years old. My father was also a major influence on my art.

What advice would you give to your younger self?

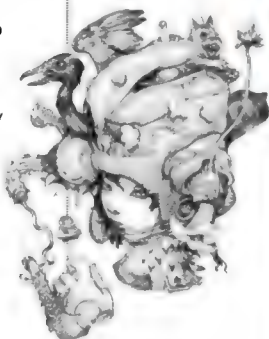
I don't have any real memory of paving my own way, so there isn't much advice I could give. If anything, I'd just say be kind to others.

Tell us about your first paid commission. Does it stand as a representation of your talent?

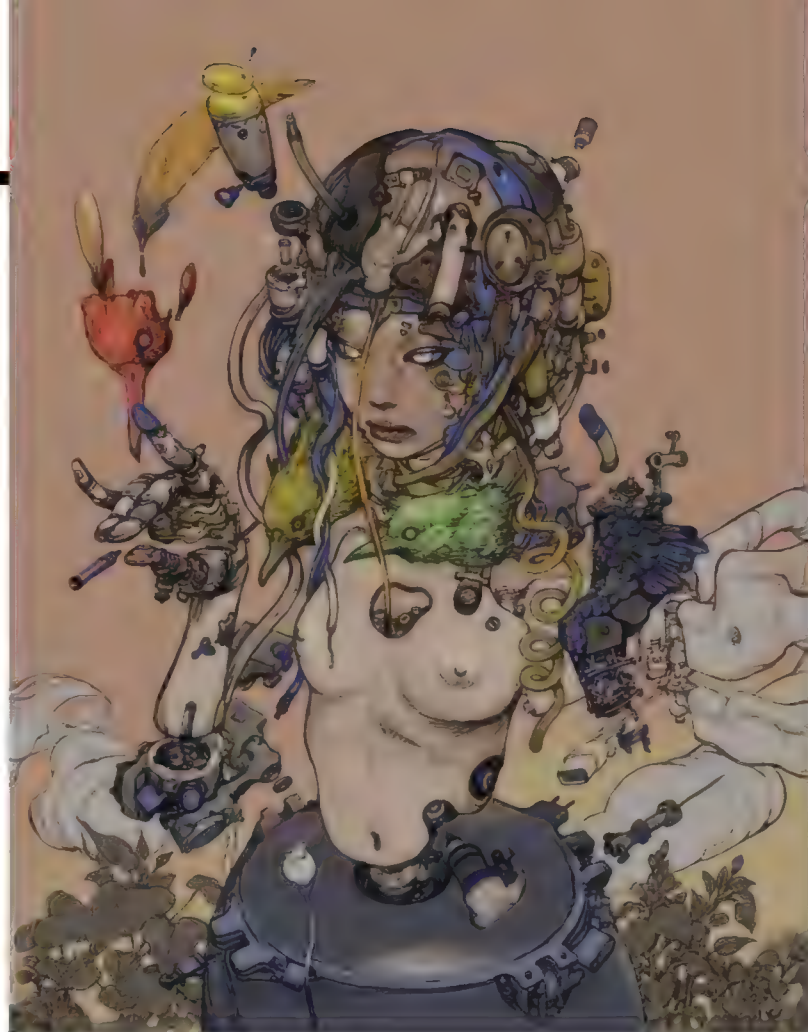
When I was 20, I was asked to create a juice packaging illustration for a



The artist believes his work sits at the boundary between manga and fine art.



Terada will be one of the speakers - or Senseis - at the THU Storytelling event in Japan this September.



design meeting by an art school teacher. It wasn't for production use, but as it was for a major company the pay was still good.

What's the last piece you finished working on?

They would be pieces I created for my solo exhibition in Los Angeles.

Is making a living as an artist all you thought it would be?

No. When I was younger, I had no vision of the future at all - all I wanted

“I can recall one particular piece that inspired me: an illustration by Moebius”

to do was get to a place where I could make a living by drawing. Even now, I don't always see myself as an artist.

How has the industry of art changed for the better since you've been working in it?

I don't have much knowledge about the art industry itself, so I'm not really in a position to comment. Although having said that, I do feel that the boundary between manga and art - which is where I seem to belong - has expanded over time.

What character or scene that you've painted do you most identify with?

As a manga artist, I've been working on a piece inspired by the 16th-century Chinese novel Journey to the West, and I feel a strong connection to its protagonist. On top of that, new characters are born with each of my exhibitions. I so often find myself wondering about the stories of their pasts and futures.

What's your next step in art or life?

The first challenge will be learning how to face myself as my hands and eyes lose their youthfulness - in other words, as I age. Beyond that, my next step will probably involve uncovering something within me that has been maturing, though I have no idea what that might be yet.

For now, I'm just hoping there's someone to watch over me. I'd like to keep drawing until I'm 90 years old and, if that's the case, I have about 30 more years, that's enough time to debut something new and create more meaningful artwork.



Katsuya Terada was born in Japan in the 1960s. His unique style melds expressive lines and shading from western and Asian comic conventions and has earned him a worldwide fanbase. Discover more at www.instagram.com/katsuyaterada.

The traditional meets
futurism in much of
Terada's artwork.





Jo Rioux

Clutter-free grandeur

How the artist changed her untidy ways to create a stately studio workspace



I admit, I'm a reformed clutterbug. As a child – and later into my adulthood than I like to admit – I'd leave a

trail of disorder in my wake. While I slowly improved over the years, I still thought that my messiness was tied to my creativity, so I was reluctant to part with it completely.

My husband and I both work from home in an old Victorian house. The first room I tried for my studio was far too small, and the second far too dark. When I moved into this one six years ago, I fell in love with the atmosphere; a cosy but tidy Victoriana.

Growing up as a second child, I got used to hand-me-downs, and it took me so many years to accumulate a ➔



I've illustrated a number of books over my career, and also have a major passion for comics.

The house sits close to the street, but with a view of beautiful maple trees that turn a brilliant yellow in the autumn. It's incredibly quiet, even with the traffic right outside.

of late 19th-century art, which is my favourite artistic era.

This strange pot is something I brought back from the Morgan Library & Museum in New York. Gift shops are dangerous places for my wallet! I didn't want the hassle of going through the airport on that trip, so I had to lug the pot around on the 16-hour overnight bus ride. That was the same trip where I discovered I can't get to sleep on buses.



My favourite teapot is one of my most treasured objects and I use it daily. I'm particularly fond of tea, especially Earl Grey, which is my favourite.

There's a lot of things I can't keep a secret. I don't like to share my work with anyone else. I don't like to put a picture in front of what they do. I don't like to reveal what I'm thinking. I don't like to reveal what I'm thinking.

My work is half traditional and half digital. I spend a lot of time at my computer desk, so I switch between sitting, standing and even kneeling on my chair. I get too restless to stay in one position.



➡ collection of furniture I personally chose. I couldn't bear the thought of hiding these beautiful pieces under piles of clutter and vowed to put everything away whenever I left the room. To my surprise, it was actually much easier than I thought. After a week it had become second nature, and I've never reverted back to my bad old ways ever since.



“I couldn't bear the thought of hiding all these beautiful pieces under piles of clutter”

This room has shown me that I can thrive in a tidy space. I thought a neat room would feel too rigid, and that keeping it that way would take up too much time. But in fact, it takes me less time to be organised. The hours I'd waste looking for sketchbooks, pens or my phone, I now spend creating art surrounded by objects that inspire me. And I have no shortage of inspiration; I'm certainly not a minimalist! I love old and strange objects, and I've stuffed as many as I could into my little studio.

EARLY RISER

I wake up around 6-7am, even on the weekends, so you can say that I'm a morning person. My working day starts around 8.30am, and the lovely

morning light in my studio is a huge incentive to get started early.

I begin by sitting in my armchair to make my daily to-do list, though I'm not overly dogmatic about it. I'm very much carried by my inspiration, and if I don't feel like doing something I tend to put it off. I manage to keep my deadlines though, and I'm constantly trying to improve my workflow.

I never used to keep to a work week, and I took days off whenever it suited me - that's a privilege that comes from making your own hours. But as I got busier with my career I found it very important to keep my work and leisure separate. Now I look forward to the weekend and getting back to work on Monday mornings.

Jo Rioux is an Ottawa-born author and illustrator. She has illustrated young adult books, chapter books and picture books, but her biggest passion remains comics. Her recent titles are the Cat's Cradle series and The Daughters of Ys. <https://jorioux.com>

I could never leave out my darling girl! This is Wenjie, a sweet and silly one-year-old German shepherd mix. She's getting used to her new place still, but she's a good girl who makes me smile every day.

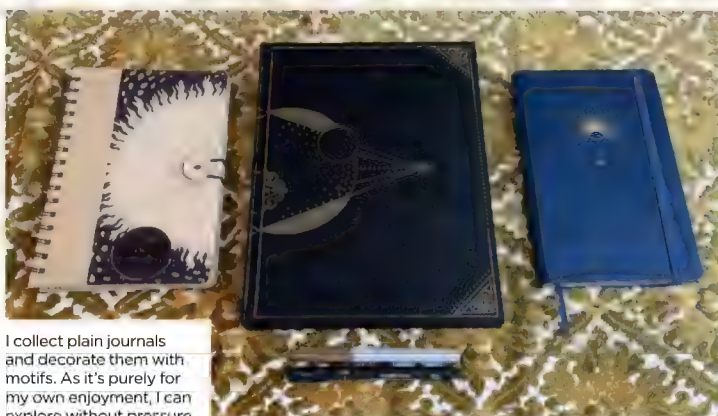


This is a piece I did for Inktober 2017. A year or so later I put it up as part of a draw this in your style challenge on Instagram and it went viral.

When I make prints to sell on Etsy, I'm left with a lot of high-quality paper cuttings. Rather than throw them out, I've started turning them into one-of-a-kind bookmarks. For someone who loves her Photoshop Undo button, it's a good exercise in decisiveness.



My style hinges on two pencils: Col-Erase Black and Terra Cotta. They were removed from individual sale, so I scoured the net for the last few boxes. Now they'll have to last me until the end of time!



I collect plain journals and decorate them with motifs. As it's purely for my own enjoyment, I can explore without pressure.



I love books, especially comics. My native tongue is French and comics are a great way to learn. I learned to read in both English and French. I've probably read these Los Bros Hernandez comics 50 times. Once I crack them open, I'm lost to the world for at least an hour.

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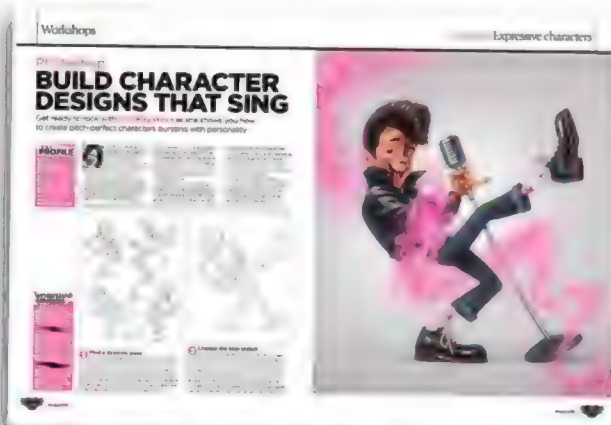
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Rockin' designs

Hello ImagineFX. The biggest struggle with my art is finding the right poses for my characters. I can draw them fine but often struggle choosing something that fits and then translating that into a finished piece. So it was really useful for me to read the character design tutorial in your latest issue, it totally rocked! Thank you so much for sharing it.

Iain, via email

Rob replies Hi Iain – thanks for writing in! I'm so pleased to hear you found that workshop useful. Lera Kiryakova certainly has a way of picking a dynamic pose that's perfectly suited to the character and the situation. And don't worry, we'll be having plenty more character design tutorials and inspiration in future issues.

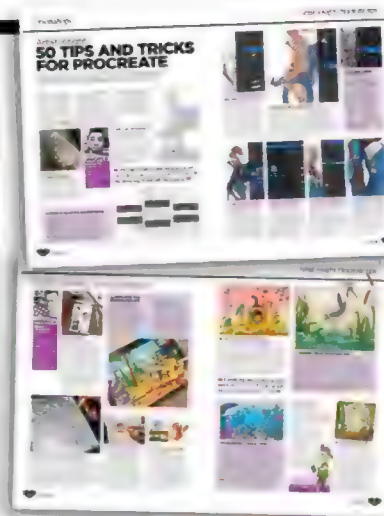
Tip-top advice

Hi Rob. I love it when you guys do tips collections and, as a Procreate user, was really pleased to see your last issue. Tips are easy to dip into and gain some ideas without the need to sit down and follow

Lera Kiryakova showed you how to paint dynamic characters in issue 255.



DID YOU MISS THE PREVIOUS PACKED ISSUE? Don't worry – you can get hold of issue 255 at ifxm.ag/single-ifx.



If you want some easy-to-digest nuggets of Procreate training, look no further than our 50 expert tips.

something for an entire evening. That can be good as well, but I like being able to read just a little bit on the bus – or even when I'm sat on the loo!

Adam, via email

Rob replies Hi Adam. I'm glad you liked that and I quite agree; there's absolutely a time and a place for learning in a more in-depth way, but taking a few minutes to top up your knowledge is valuable too. I think our panel of experts shared some top advice for both new and experienced users.

Uncovering characters

Hi ImagineFX team. I read your latest issue and, while not a traditional artist myself, I really liked the workshop by Eric Messinger. It was fascinating to see how he took a basic splodge and pulled something great out of it. It's made me want to grab some charcoal and paper myself, which is something I've never thought about doing before. Oh, and I really liked his video guides too. It's nice to see you have some video workshops!

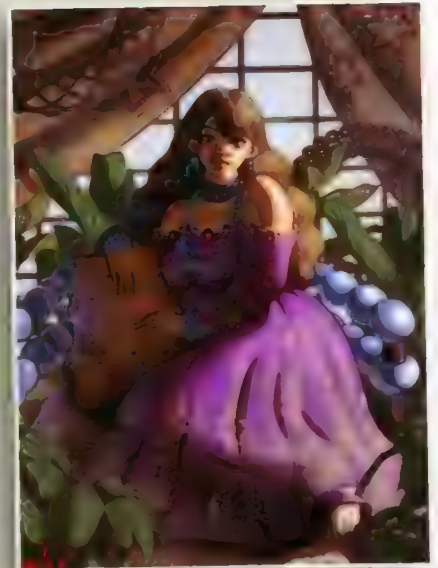
Gemma, via email

Rob replies Hi Gemma. I'm so glad you got something from Eric's workshop. His written tutorial and videos were both fantastic and I hope raised the possibilities of a different way of working for many people. His method is unusual in that he doesn't start with a fixed idea of the end result, letting the marks on the paper guide him. But he still takes charge of the piece and adapts to fit his needs. It was really refreshing to read and, like you, I felt the urge to get away from the digital realm and get my hands dirty.

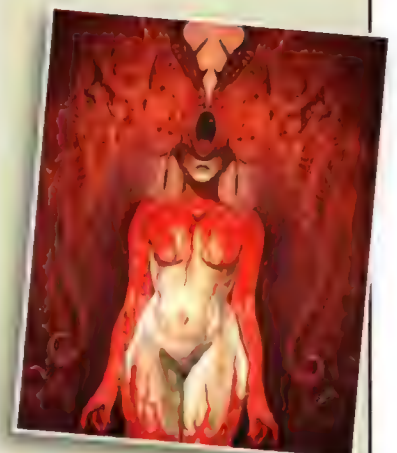
And I totally agree about the videos. Eric is such an informative teacher, but also has a very welcoming manner and shows you when things don't go according to plan, which is valuable instruction.



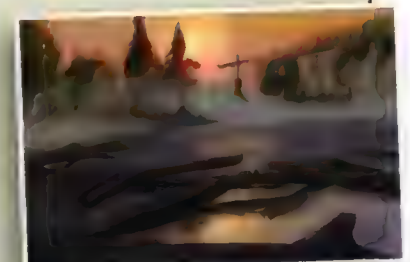
New works that have grabbed our attention



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If you've created art that you want us to shout about simply tag us on X or Instagram, and use the hashtag #imaginefx

KILLER INSTINCTS

サカモトデイズ

Trevor Hogg gets the scoop on the character designs for hit action-comedy anime series *Sakamoto Days*...

← CHARACTER DOSSIER



ver his career, Yo Moriyama has mainly been known for producing concept artwork and prop designs for shows such as *Bubble* and *Lupin the Third: Goemon's Blood Spray*, but he has also been developing a reputation for crafting character designs.

That was the skill set he required for Netflix anime series *Sakamoto Days*. Based on the manga created by Yuto

Suzuki, the adaptation is animated by TMS Entertainment and directed by Masaki Watanabe. The story revolves around a notorious assassin who falls in love, swears never to kill again, raises a family, and physically gets out of shape. However, the only retirement allowed by the organisation he used to work for is death itself.

"Designing the main character in the way I did for *Sakamoto Days* is probably my first time doing anything

like that!" says Moriyama, who was officially credited as the show's character designer. "I have done more of the character concepts for projects outside of ones I've directed myself, but designing characters that actually come to life in an animation like this was a first time for me."

MANGA STUDY

Moriyama was initially unfamiliar with the source material. "I actually hadn't read it until I got the offer to work on this project," he says. As a result, the original character designs from the manga were always a point of reference. "When I got the offer to work on the project and started, the manga was still at around 10 volumes or so and was gradually transitioning from the comical side to being a little more serious," Moriyama adds. "I talked with the director about the balance between the two styles to match the action.

"One aspect that's so loved about *Sakamoto Days* is the characters. They're already cool and I had to think about keeping that look and feel when animated."

Along the way, director Watanabe made few special

← Taro Sakamoto

Taro was the first to be designed, but there weren't too many specific revisions to be made. He's a relatively simple character whether fat or slim, so his expressions were relatively unchanged. However, his clothes saw some adjustments, such as the size of his shirt or jeans, or the wrinkles on the fabric.

→ Hana Sakamoto

When designing Hana, Taro and Aoi Sakamoto's daughter, there were few references for Moriyama to work with, which made it slightly difficult. Instead it felt a little like he was designing an original character.



Sakamoto Days



PAGE TO SCREEN

The manga debuted in Weekly Shōnen Jump in November 2020 and has now become a hit anime series for Netflix.

WEIGHTY HUMOUR

Manga artist Yuto Suzuki subverts the assassin genre with a skilful yet overweight and middle-aged lead.



“The characters are so cool...
I had to think about keeping
that look in the animation”



UNIVERSAL CHOPSTICKS

Taro Sakamoto is so quick that he can use chopsticks to eat noodles and catch bullets.

requests of Moriヤマ. "He allowed me the freedom for the designs," says Moriヤマ. "For individual characters, of course there was some advice and we discussed as we went, and made adjustments here and there too."

The design of family figurehead Taro Sakamoto was quite different from the other characters. "We kept in mind that his presence itself makes things entertaining," says Moriヤマ. "But if we made his design too simple it would stand out from the rest, so we tried to balance it well against the serious side. The lines of the original manga have a very nuanced touch to them, so we were always thinking



FAMILY MAN

Being a husband and father are the most important roles for the retired assassin, which is reflected in his look and demeanour.

about how best to transition that across to the anime."

The older, fatter Taro has been given a more muscular look for the animated rendition. "We discussed closely with the director about how to make Taro look fat," Moriヤマ adds. "We tried to make him bigger, thicker and heavier compared to the original manga. We wanted to make his form look as though a muscular person had become fat, rather than him just being a fat person. For the

chubbiness of his face, that was made possible through animation and making it funny as it moves."

Thanks to Suzuki's manga, there was no additional research needed. "I studied that a lot," says Moriヤマ. "There's a lot of information in the original work beyond the characters I designed, such as the way the lines are drawn or other characters that aren't as important. These things also became references when I was working on the character designs."

"I also studied the way the shadows are drawn. Since it's a manga, the drawings are quite different from when it was first serialised and now. At this point, I feel that it has more realistic shadow on the characters' ➡



ON THE MOVE

Some alterations were made to the original character designs to accommodate the introduction of motion.

“We tried to make Taro bigger, thicker and heavier compared to the manga”



Shin Asakura

This was a smooth design overall. Shin has a youthful style such as oversized clothes, though some tweaks were made after discussions with Yuto Suzuki.

Lu Shaotang

Similarly to Hana, there were few documents or images to use as reference for Lu. She drinks alcohol, so she was intentionally made to look a little older than in the manga as the team didn't want it to appear as if a child was drinking in the series.



Nagumo

This was the character that had the most design revisions made. He's one of the characters that Yuto Suzuki is passionate about, and he had a clear image of Nagumo's appearance in his mind.



CHARACTER DOSSIER CONTINUED ➡

ROTUND FUN

The jowls provide plenty of comedic and expressive moments.



TRANSFORMED FOR THE ACTION

How a smart piece of stylisation links the lead character's past and present

A clever creative decision by Yuto Suzuki was to have the slim form of Taro Sakamoto not only appear in flashbacks, but to use the weight loss as a means to emphasise how much effort and energy he puts into fighting, much like his cinematic inspirations John Wick and Robert McCall of *The Equalizer*. One could argue the slimmer Taro Sakamoto is the character's true form, which has been overtaken by his desire to raise a family. This explains why an exaggerated, cartoony teddy bear aesthetic was adopted for the patriarch's fat persona and a more realistic stylisation for the slimmed-down version of Taro.



RETURN TO FORM

When Taro Sakamoto overexerts himself, he goes back to his lean athletic physique.



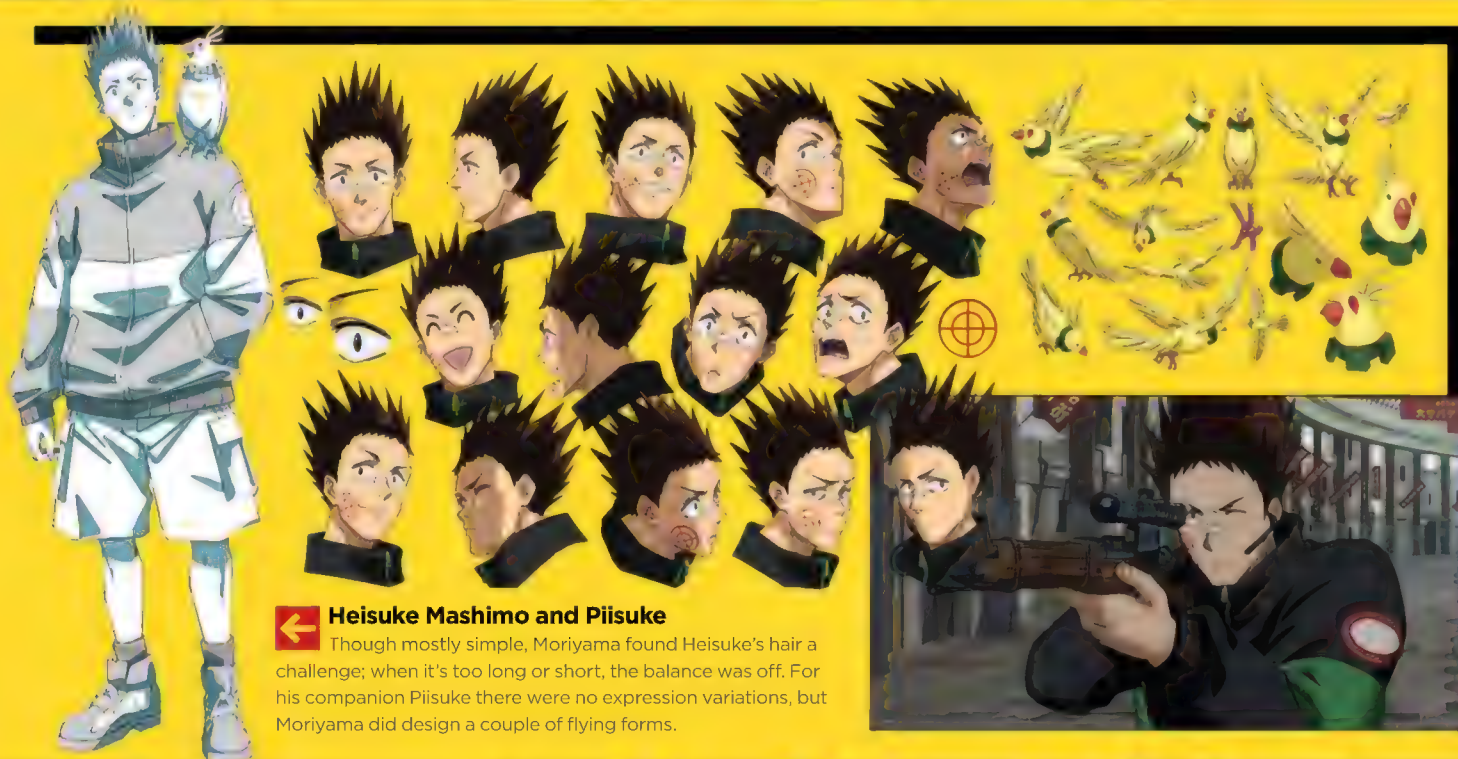
COMMON ATTRIBUTES

The hair and glasses are signature traits for the slim and fat versions of Taro.



MANGA AESTHETIC

A paper-texture filter was applied to honour the source material.



Heisuke Mashimo and Piisuke

Though mostly simple, Moriyama found Heisuke's hair a challenge; when it's too long or short, the balance was off. For his companion Piisuke there were no expression variations, but Moriyama did design a couple of flying forms.

CHARACTER DOSSIER CONTINUED →

Sakamoto Days

“The designs and animated characters are the same, and yet also totally different”

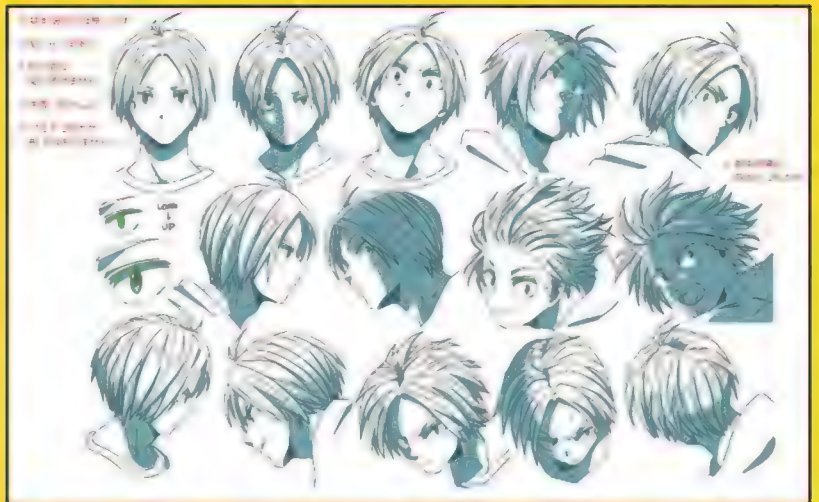
IF YOU COULD READ MY MIND

A unique characteristic of Shin is his telepathic ability, which comes in handy during fights.



RANGE OF EMOTION

A wide variety of facial expressions and poses were explored for Shin.



BEYOND CONCEPTING

Yo Moriyama enjoyed the opportunity to design characters who come to life through animation.

Feature

→ faces, so that was something we incorporated. Usually shadows on faces are simply a tone darker, but in Sakamoto Days there are lines in the shadows as well, which makes it more realistic and stand out. These were the things we wanted to reference."

PAYING HOMAGE

Sticking close to the manga, the character designs saw few alterations, even to better align with the physical capabilities needed for certain action sequences, as Moriyama explains:

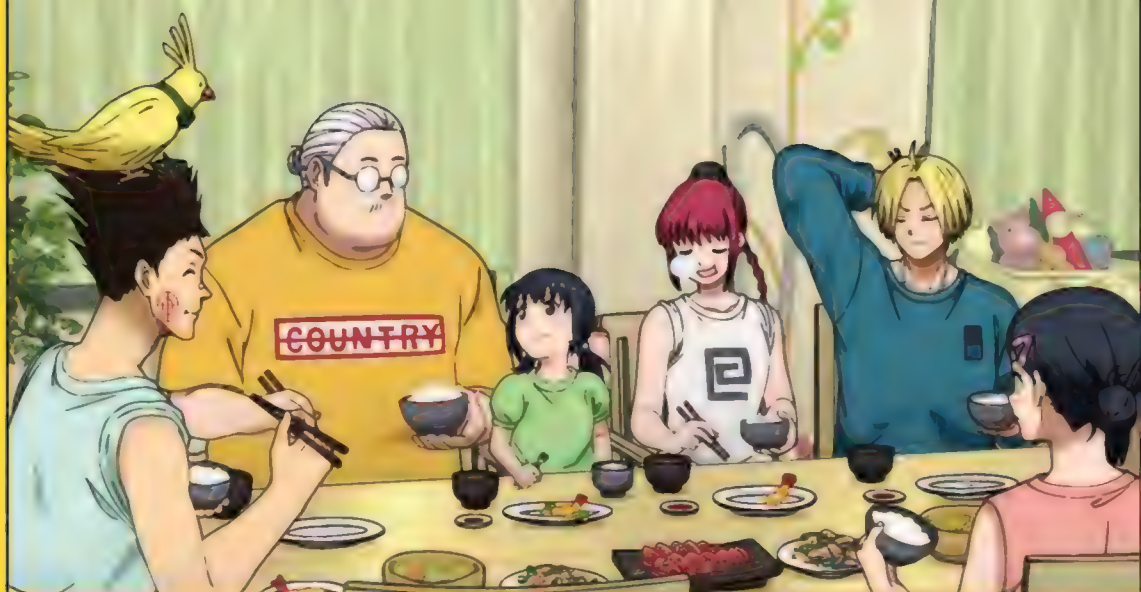
“As the characters already existed, I had to organise their characteristics in my head before I began drawing”

"We didn't bring in too many extra characteristics that would differentiate the characters from the original manga, but we absolutely did retain the features that were unique to the character." A signature accessory for Taro, for example, is his glasses. "We tried to make his form realistic, but



CORRECT TONE

The character designs had to reflect both the comical and serious sides of the storytelling.



making his glasses super simple or his moustache comic-like, the intentional inconsistency is one of his features that we kept in mind. That's a very catchy aspect of Taro's look."

Conceptualising a prop isn't significantly different from designing a character. "It depends on whether what I'm designing already exists or doesn't exist, whether it might be characters or props," Moriyama observes. "I've previously worked on character design, but most of it would be original work where I'd design the character from scratch."

"Working on a project that's based on an original manga was a relatively new experience for me; the process is totally different. When I work on an original project, I don't think too



BEING RESOURCEFUL

Taro Sakamoto makes use of whatever props are available on-site to defend himself.

much about it and start drawing, then I'll arrange it from there. But for Sakamoto Days, the characters already existed, so I had to organise their characteristics in my head before I began the drawing process."

A major supporting cast member, meanwhile, went through the most iterations. "Compared to the other characters, Nagumo was a more difficult character to capture the characteristics of," Moriyama reflects. "I would draw rough drafts of the characters and have Suzuki-sensei



← Takamura

This was a favourite character for Moriyama. There weren't too many difficulties for Takamura, but it was challenging to capture his vibe - he might be old, but he still has a scary aura. As Takamura doesn't have a large range of expressions, there were few designs to develop.



← Osaragi

The part of Osaragi that proved difficult was her clothes, such as the lace. As it's not realistic to have the same number of details in the anime compared to the manga, some simplification was needed. While Osaragi doesn't have too many expressions, she does have a cute, comical side that required a few different designs to be drafted.



→ Hyo

As a character with personality, Hyo was straightforward to design, though Yuto Suzuki did suggest some tweaks during the process.



CHARACTER DOSSIER CONTINUED

FINDING BALANCE FOR THE MOOD

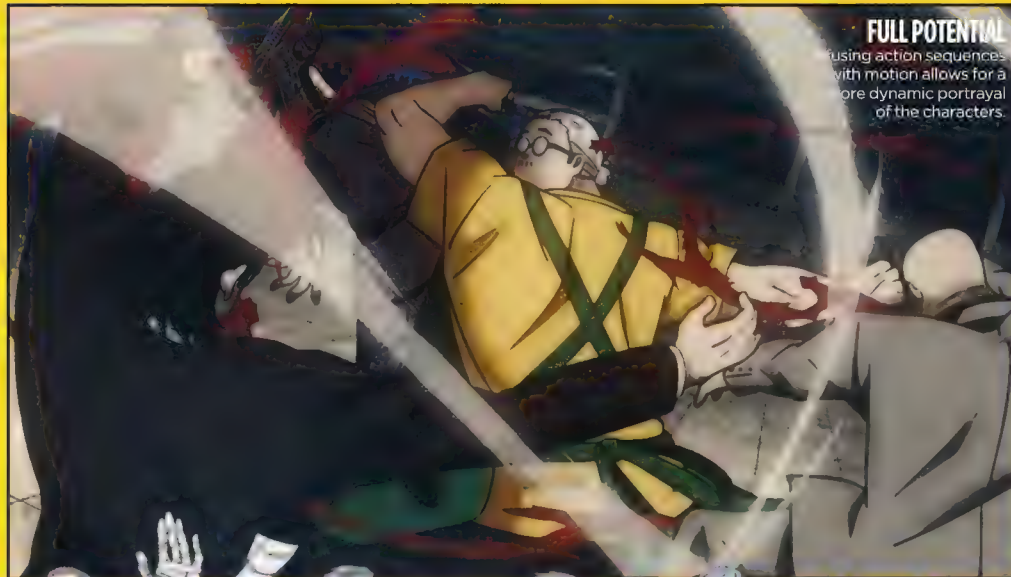
Shadows helped convey the desired tone and emotion in Sakamoto Days

"We'd specify the basic shadows in scenes, as well as seek out some references for what they'd look like depending on a character's expression, for example serious versus comical," Moriyama says. "Sakamoto Days often has a comical feel along with a more serious side at times, so the artistic direction differs quite a lot."



FEEDBACK LOOP

Nagumo required a couple of back-and-forth sessions with Yuto Suzuki to properly capture his characteristics.



FULL POTENTIAL

Using action sequences with motion allows for a more dynamic portrayal of the characters.

review it. For Nagumo, we had a couple of back-and-forth feedback sessions before finalising. On the other hand, Shin and the fat Taro both went smoothly."

JOY OF ACTION

Among the characters, there's a personal favourite for Moriyama. "It's hard for me to choose just one, but Gaku was a fun character to design," he smiles. "The designs and the final characters that are actually animated are the same, yet they're also totally different at the same time."

"While I did the character design for the series, that design isn't the final stage. From there, we add movement and colours, and it becomes the final product. In that sense, I look forward to people seeing Takamura; he's a quieter character, and in the manga you don't actually see his action sequences too much – it's too quick. I think his action sequences should be appealing in the anime so I look forward to people seeing him."

Moriyama felt it was an interesting experience having to deal with the established expectations that come with working on an existing IP for the first time. "That was challenging for me," he says. "When the characters already exist they'll have their fans, and we need to translate them across to the anime well. As much as it's challenging, that's also the creative and fun part of it." ●

DEADLY CALM

Fights are treated like a video game by Gaku, who has a laid-back attitude but is still incredibly powerful.



Development sheet

Artist PROFILE

Samuel Navarro

LOCATION: France



Samuel is a concept artist based in Paris. He enjoys working on stylised environments, creative props and solving design problems for the animation and video game industries. Samuel also loves painting backgrounds and creating traditional artworks in gouache.

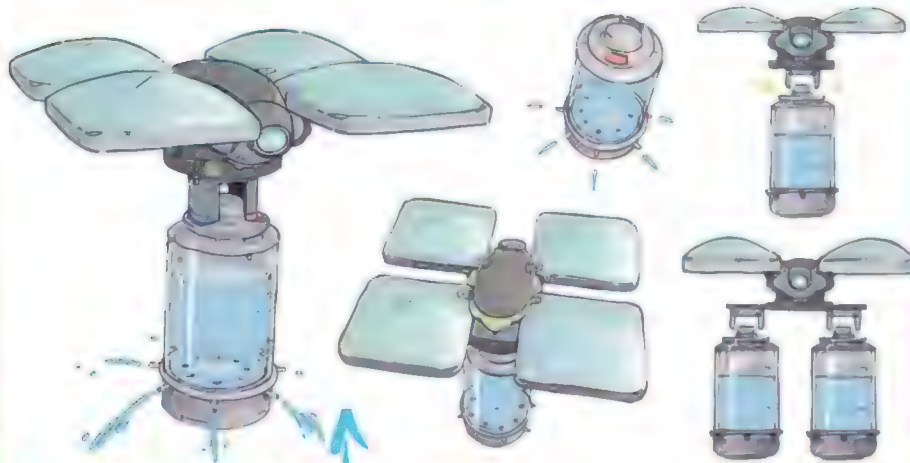
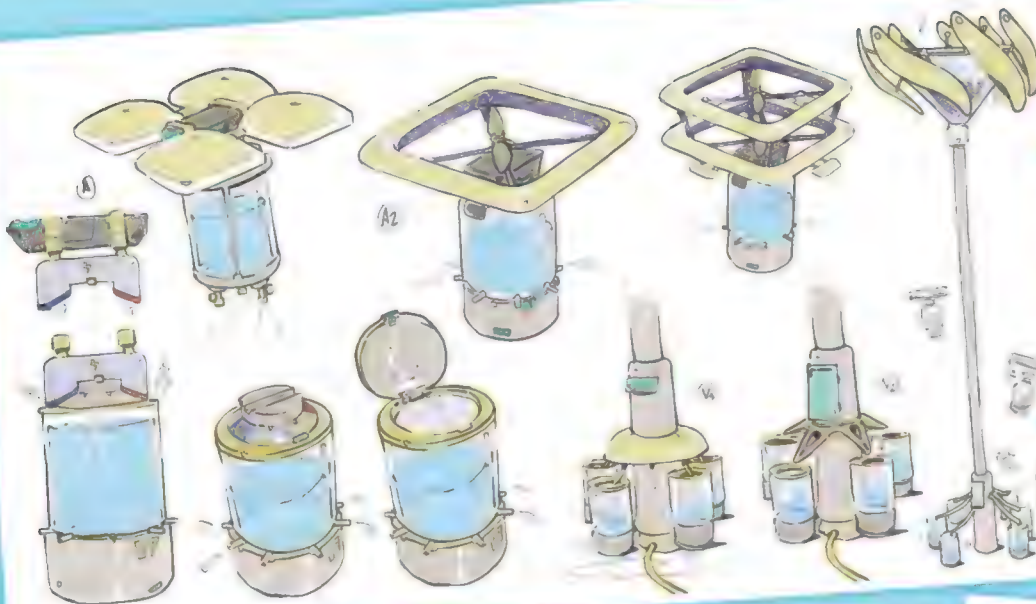
www.artstation.com/illbob

PROJECT TITLE: **LUMA**

Samuel Navarro introduces a solarpunk universe where characters Ren and Cora go on an adventure to discover the source of the bizarre phenomenon that shattered their peaceful lives

Early research: solarpunk technology

Early research into solarpunk technology, focusing on sustainable energy and vertical farming. The research includes a collection of sketches and references for the design of the Luma universe.



Production-ready design and functionality info

Production-ready design and functionality info for the Luma universe. The design includes a collection of sketches and references for the design of the Luma universe.

Artistic direction: crops and icons

Artistic direction: crops and icons for the Luma universe. The design includes a collection of sketches and references for the design of the Luma universe.





Gameplay integration and zone mapping

Here, my challenge was to fit the farm zone into a four-minute gameplay segment. A map was designed that connected the heroes' village and home up with the entrance of the sewers. My goal was to create a harmonious layout that would naturally guide the player through the farm and encourage them to explore before leaving the area.

Final environment: market zone painting

This image was the most challenging part of the entire project due to the top-down angle and the complexity of painting lush vegetation with volume. I used a 3D base from Blender with hand-painted textures to establish the scene, and then worked over the top of it in Photoshop. This market area allows players to interact with NPC farmers.



SEND US YOUR CONCEPTS!

Are you working on a fresh project or doodling your own development sketches that you'd like to share with us?

LET US KNOW! Email your WIPs and final images to mail@imaginefx.com

Sketchbook

Choro Choi

Open up the Guerrilla Games artist's bad-to-the-bone sketchbook to explore her personal projects and fascination with faces

Artist PROFILE

Choro Choi

LOCATION: The Netherlands

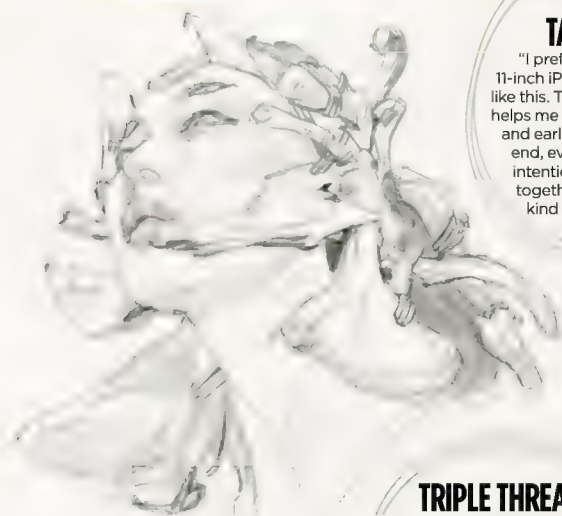


Originally from South Korea, Choro Choi has a background in fine arts and has been a character concept artist for over 13 years. She is currently based in Amsterdam as part of the team at Guerrilla Games, contributing to the likes of Horizon Forbidden West. Choro loves to draw faces, and likes to play with the tension between realism and exaggeration in her artwork to develop engaging characters.

www.artstation.com/choro

TOP TABLET

"I prefer using my 11-inch iPad for sketches like this. The small screen helps me ignore mistakes and early marks. In the end, every line feels intentional, coming together to form a kind of texture."



TRIPLE THREAT

"I love how trios can create tension and stability in my compositions. The background reference was a photo taken in Seoul, where I used to live."

ELECTRIC ATHLETICISM

"While travelling in Seoul and Tokyo, I took so many photos of electricity poles. Inspired by these, I imagined a character running across them. Although I was aware the perspective might be off, I chose to prioritise the vibe and mood that I wanted to convey. Since the rise of AI tools, I actually find it fun to embrace these 'flaws' as proof that this is truly human-made art."



“I actually find it fun to embrace flaws, as it’s proof that my artwork is truly human-made”

**THREAD
AND BONE**

“I enjoy drawing bones. They remind me of the fleeting nature of life and, paradoxically, how precious it is.”





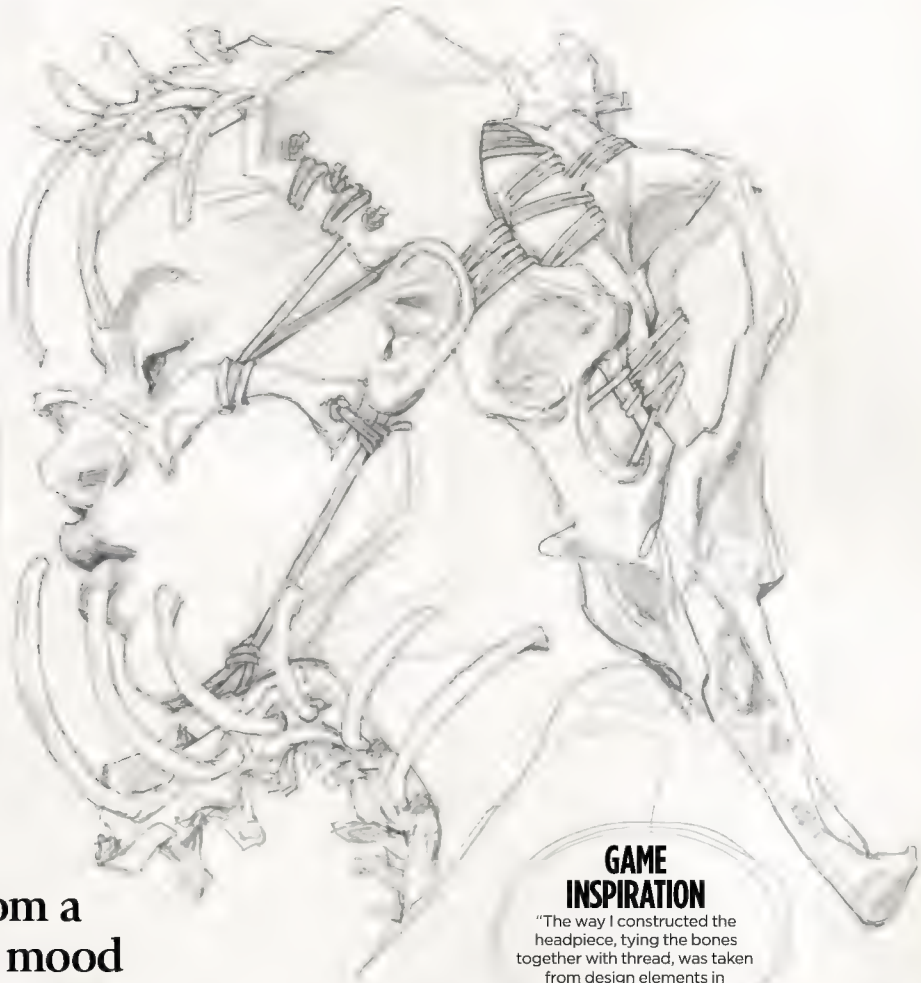
UNIQUE CREATIONS

"I use references because I want my work to feel grounded. But I also try to look at them from a different angle or focus on the mood I want to convey, as I'm aiming to create images people haven't seen before."



SALPURI CHARACTER DESIGN

"I've been working on a personal project called Salpuri, which refers to a Korean shaman ritual dance said to cleanse pain and sorrow. I used elements inspired by shamans, but reinterpreted them non-traditionally."



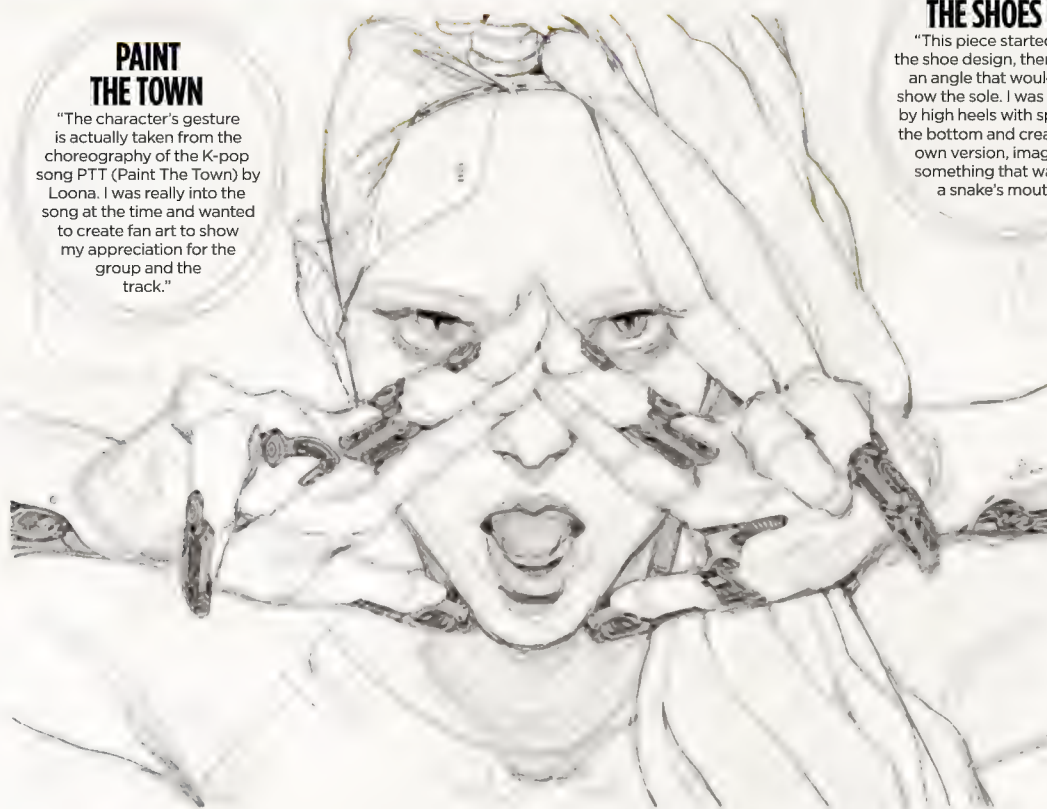
GAME INSPIRATION

"The way I constructed the headpiece, tying the bones together with thread, was taken from design elements in Horizon Forbidden West."

“ I try to look at references from a different angle or focus on the mood that I want to convey in an image ”

PAINT THE TOWN

"The character's gesture is actually taken from the choreography of the K-pop song PTT (Paint The Town) by Loona. I was really into the song at the time and wanted to create fan art to show my appreciation for the group and the track."



FROM THE SHOES UP

"This piece started with the shoe design, then I chose an angle that would best show the sole. I was inspired by high heels with spikes on the bottom and created my own version, imagining something that was like a snake's mouth."



CARD GAME

"These characters are playing with hwatu (flower cards). I imagined them killing time between calls while waiting for their next task."

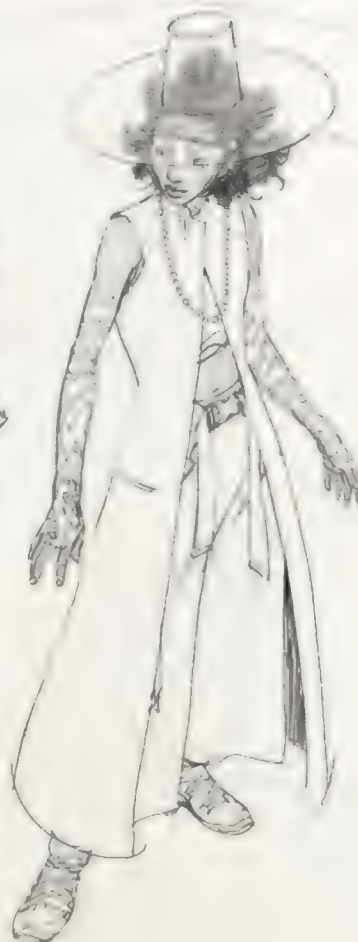
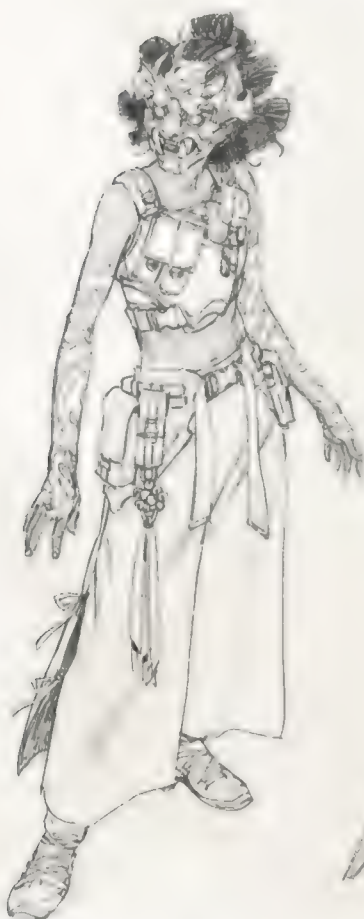


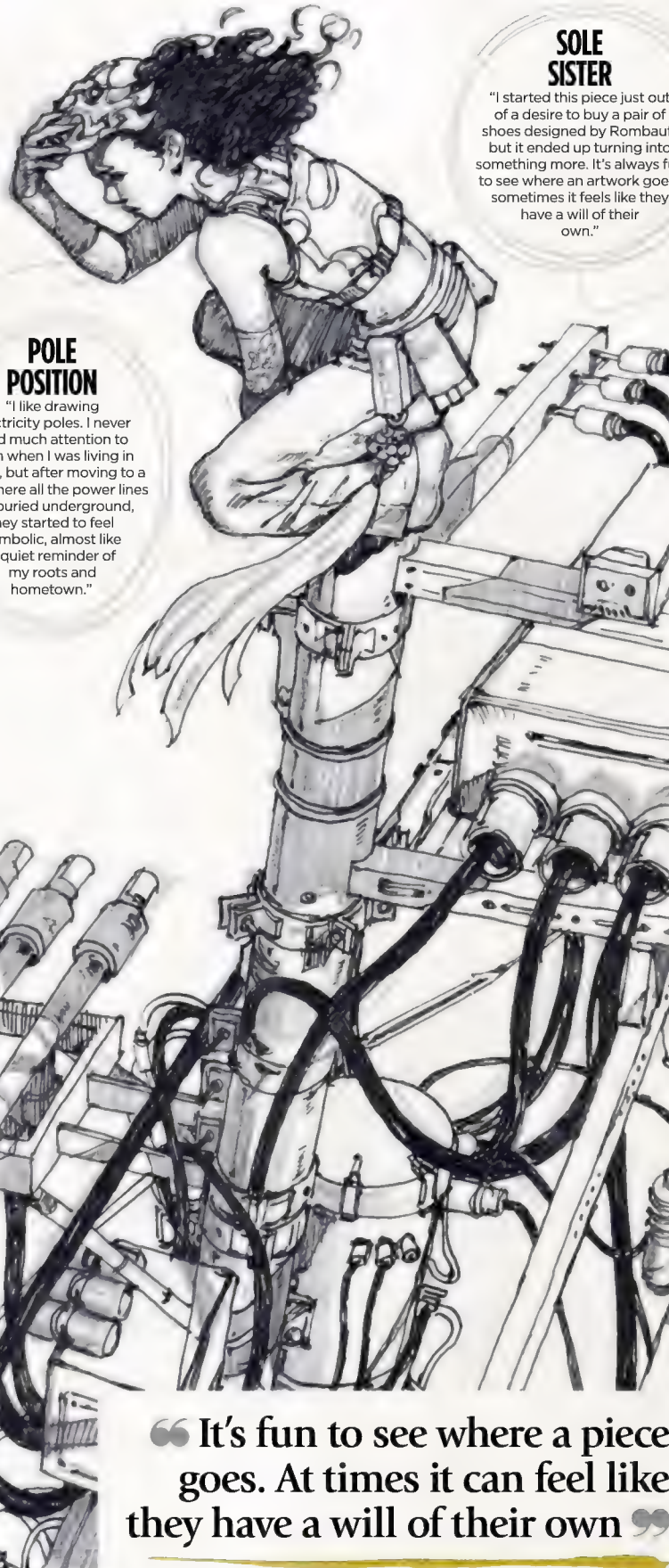
ON THE LOOSE

"I've always been drawn to loose, wobbly lines, though they haven't come naturally to me. This piece was an early attempt to explore that direction and gave me a glimpse of how I might approach them. Around this time, I started enjoying the combination of the HB Pencil and Smudge tool in Procreate, a pairing that I still use often."

TAILORED WARDROBE

"My Salpuri project is set in a world that blends sci-fi and shamanism together, and features traditional Korean outfits and other cultural elements. These are the character's different outfits for when she's working, in the office, or at home."





POLE POSITION

"I like drawing electricity poles. I never paid much attention to them when I was living in Korea, but after moving to a city where all the power lines are buried underground, they started to feel symbolic, almost like a quiet reminder of my roots and hometown."

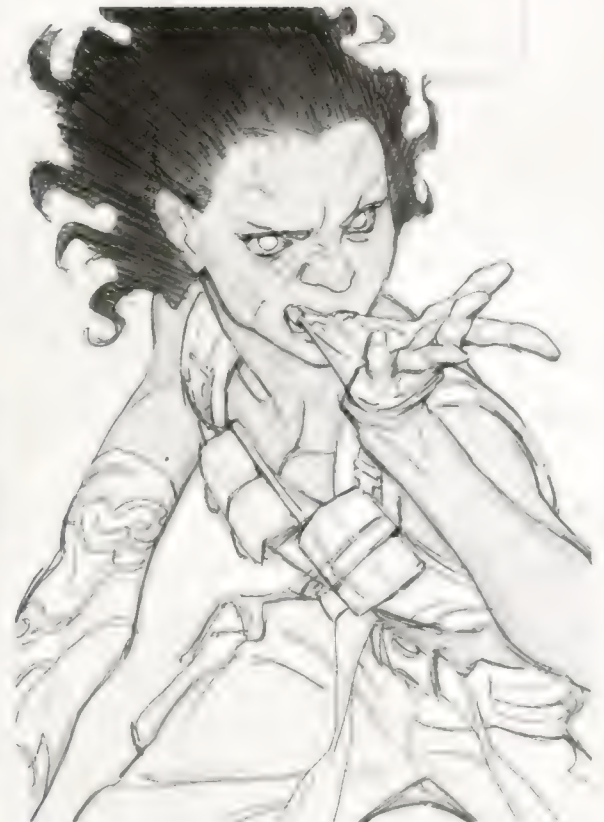
SOLE SISTER

"I started this piece just out of a desire to buy a pair of shoes designed by Rombaut, but it ended up turning into something more. It's always fun to see where an artwork goes; sometimes it feels like they have a will of their own."



IN A RUSH

"I was trying to capture an image that came to mind while building the character's background details. I like her gesture and how the black hair resembles comic-style speed lines."



“It’s fun to see where a piece goes. At times it can feel like they have a will of their own”

Do you want to share your sketches with your fellow ImagineFX readers? Send us an email with a selection of your art, captions for each piece and a photo and bio of yourself to sketchbook@imaginefx.com

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NO.1 FOR DIGITAL ARTISTS

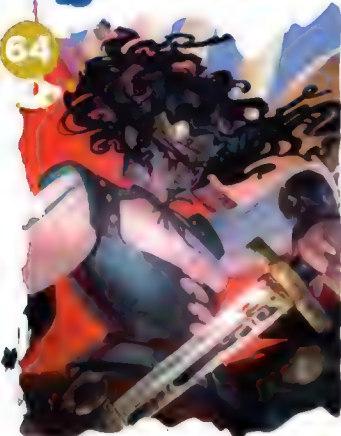
ImagineFX Workshops

**Workshop assets
are available...**

Download your resources by turning to page 5. And if you see the video workshop badge, you can watch the artist in action, too.



Advice from the world's best artists



This issue:

58 Illustrate an epic book cover

Grab the attention with a captivating cover thanks to Fernanda Suarez's process.

64 Create tension with contrast

Laura Rosmaninho explains how she pushes an intense and engrossing narrative.

66 Compose a fluent sci-fi painting

Step into the future with Emanuel Dias as he goes into the details of his robot shot.

70 Focus on value during design

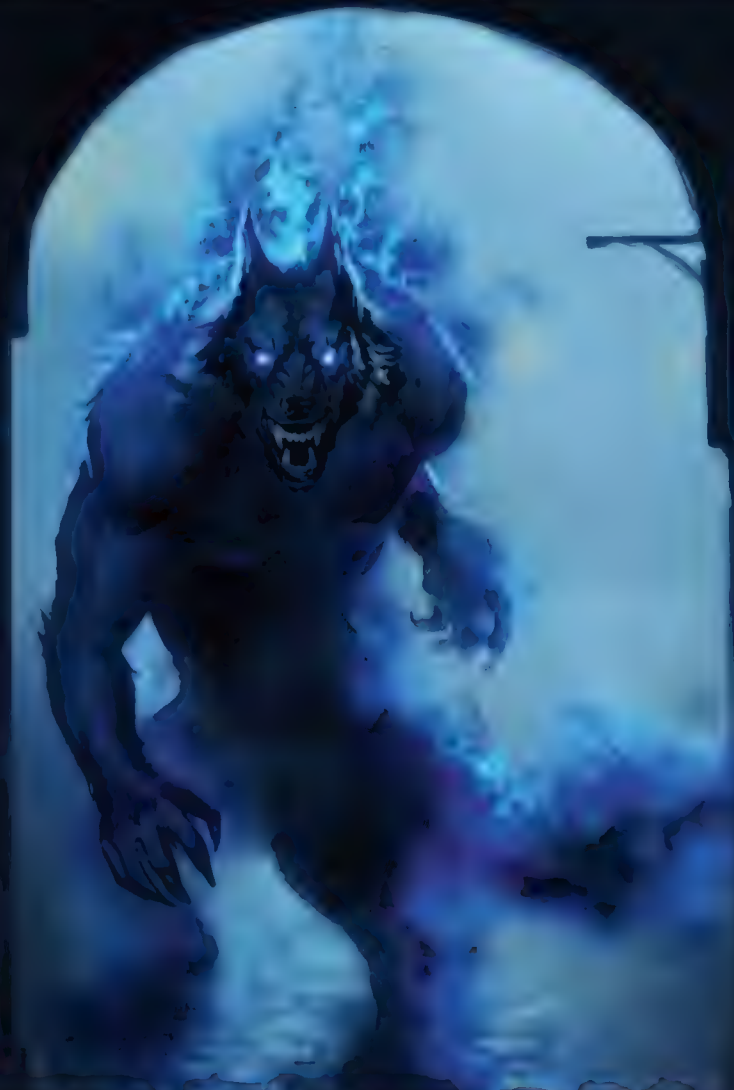
Discover how Michael Darjania builds up a badass fantasy piece with a little help from 3D tools.

72 Ink concept art with comic style

Matt Sanz quickly crafts a video game concept with a hint of comic book flavour.

78 Lead with ideas and narratives

Short stories and real influences are the launchpad for Sathish Kumar and his designs.



Photoshop

ILLUSTRATE AN EPIC BOOK COVER

Learn how to create captivating fantasy artwork that draws in readers as **Fernanda Suarez** goes in-depth on her workflow

Artist PROFILE

Fernanda Suarez

LOCATION: Chile

Santiago-born Fernanda is a digital artist who currently works as a freelance illustrator. Character design and storytelling are her 'biggest passions'.

<https://bit.ly/416MGXW>



This is the cover art for Laura E. Weymouth's fantasy novel *Steel and Spellfire*. It's set in Valora, a city inspired by Victorian-era London.

The main protagonists are Pandora Smalls, who has learned to hone and wield her magic in a way the world has never seen, and Kit Beacon, a promising young member of the Royal Guard. Pandora's magic – called *Spellfire* – takes the form of

blue flames. In the scene, we see Pandora and Kit facing up against a monster in a dark alley.

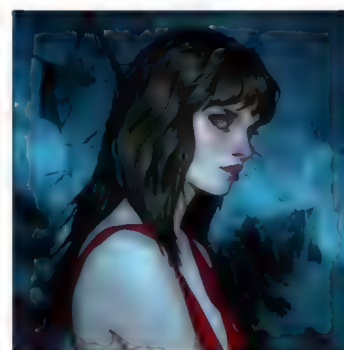
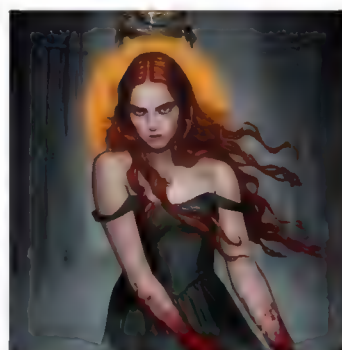
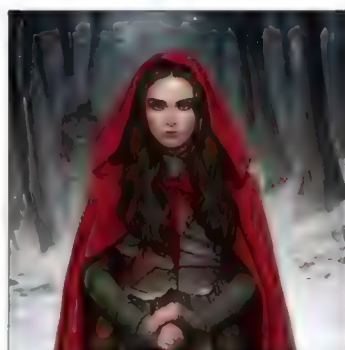
For this tutorial, I'll guide you through the process of creating a book cover illustration just like this. We'll explore drawing the rough concept, how to convey your idea at an early stage and creating dynamic compositions, all the way through to finalising the details.

To follow along you'll need a solid understanding of anatomy – enough

to be able to draw characters in a variety of poses and angles. Also handy is a grasp of basic composition fundamentals such as balance and focus, plus standard lighting and colour concepts.

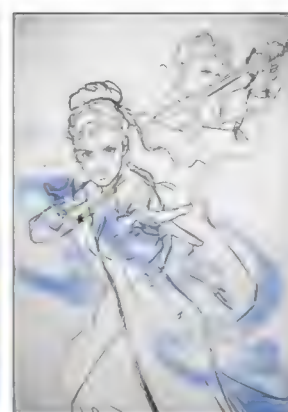
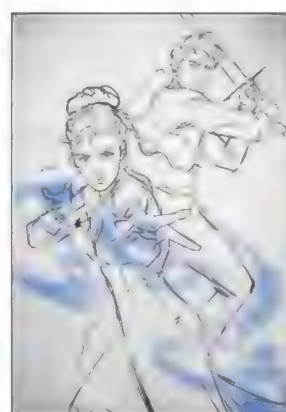
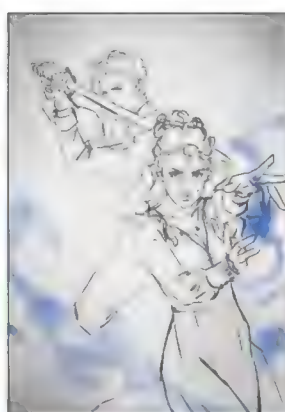
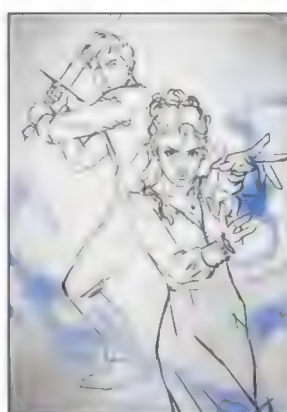
I used Photoshop for this piece, but any digital art software you're familiar with should do the job, as we'll be working with fairly standard tools. A drawing tablet would also be an advantage to utilise pen pressure when using some of the brushes.





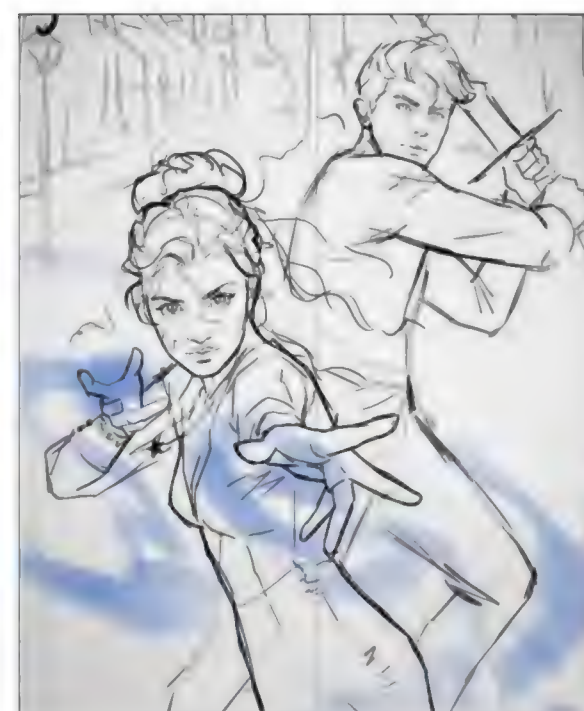
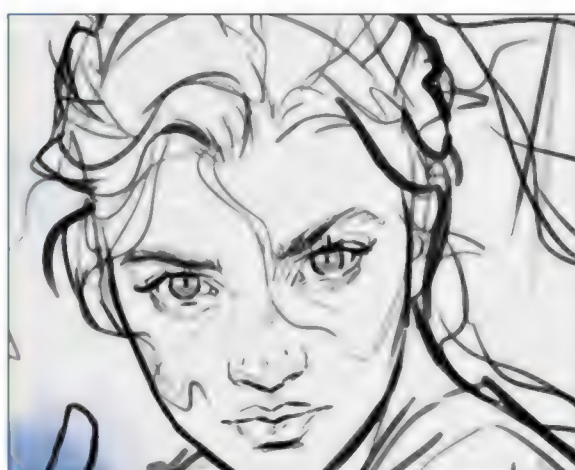
1 Get prepared with research and a mood board

When working with a client, we're given a brief with the basic concept for the cover. Having that, the first thing to do is get some research in. Look for images that work with the idea you have in mind, serve as references, or provide inspiration. When you've got a collection ready, create a mood board and a colour palette. The client might also show examples from your portfolio that they like.



2 Work on the initial sketch

It's time to work on the rough sketch. This can look messy, but don't worry! We want to create something dynamic, so the characters' poses require a feeling of movement. The idea is to try to capture a moment where the character is in motion rather than static. You can use diagonal lines to guide the placement of the characters and seek out balance within the composition, incorporating focal points while leaving other areas bare.



3 Clean and adjust

I like experimenting with different line weights, which can help create a visual hierarchy. You can also clean up the line work if it's too messy; the important thing is to keep it readable for the client. Focus on the characters' expressions to ensure they convey the right emotion and intensity needed. Having the characters look directly at the viewer creates stronger engagement.

RESOURCES

WORKSHOP BRUSHES

PHOTOSHOP

CUSTOM BRUSHES: MULTITASK

I used this for almost all my rendering. I like it for hair and clothing; it has a nice texture.

FOG 01

Make sure that Transfer is enabled in the Brush Settings in order to get a softer stroke.

FIRE 01 & FIRE 02

The Angle Jitter setting is dropped to 0% for Pen Pressure in the Brush Settings for both.

GET YOUR RESOURCES

See page 5 now!



4 Colour mock-up

When you have a sketch approved, start work on the colour mock-up. This is where we decide on the colour scheme and lighting. Using a round soft-edged brush, quickly add colour and place light and shadow. We need to set the overall mood for the piece, so the values and colour are crucial. My image will have cool colour temperature and feature darker, ambient lighting.



5 Set a good base

To begin the refined rendering stage, I like to create separate layers for all the different elements of the image, such as skin, hair, clothing, magic and so on. Fill in the complete area or shape for each of those elements and then lock the layer when you're done – then we can move on to adding flat colours.



6 Add colour and light

This is a polished version of the colour mock-up. With flat colours on all the separate layers, use a round soft-edged brush to add light and shadow where needed, as well as colour variation. It's essential to keep in mind the lighting and colour scheme you've chosen. Adding some rim lighting to the characters also helps to create more depth. I suggest focusing on the characters to begin with and retaining the background from the mock-up.



7 Begin rendering

Now is the time for more refined rendering. Paint the characters with a slightly warmer colour palette at first, then adjust the temperature further down the line. Always focus first on the main focal point of the image, in my case the two characters. Using a round hard-edged brush, sculpt and define the bigger areas of the face. We're creating hard edges with our brushstrokes now. ➤➤



8 Go step-by-step developing the face

For the face, focus on the bigger volumes first such as the forehead, cheeks, nose and jaw. Next add the finer details to the eyes, lips and other features. To achieve a nice skin texture, avoid over-blending your brushstrokes. If it's a realistic look you're aiming for, you need colour variation – for example, adding red to the cheeks or a cooler colour underneath the eyes.



9 Use two layers for the hair

When you do hair, use a base layer that covers the entire shape. Add a new layer on top and start painting the highlights with a lighter colour – my Multitask and Multitask Soft brushes in this issue's resources are great for this. Lock both hair layers and adjust the value and colour as needed for depth and volume.



10 Design the clothing

The Multitask brush is also good for clothes, with a round hard-edged brush for finer details. It's essential to know the type of material you're painting to understand its qualities and how to translate them into a painting. In this case, I was painting a silky ivory dress that's shiny and flowy, and a guard uniform that's thick and opaque. Same as the skin, I like to leave brushstrokes visible.



11 Fix any mistakes

I worked on the male character at this point and added the blue flames using my Fire brushes. You might catch something that needs to be fixed at any moment. For example, I needed to adjust the angle of the male character's head so it followed the line of movement and spine more effectively. If everything is on separate layers, it should be easy to change.



12 Work on the background

With your characters almost completed, switch your attention across to the background. I have the objects and buildings of my background on separate layers as well. I initially worked on the design in black and white, then added colour back using colour, Color Balance and Overlay adjustments. I did this to save time and because it doesn't require a lot of different colours.



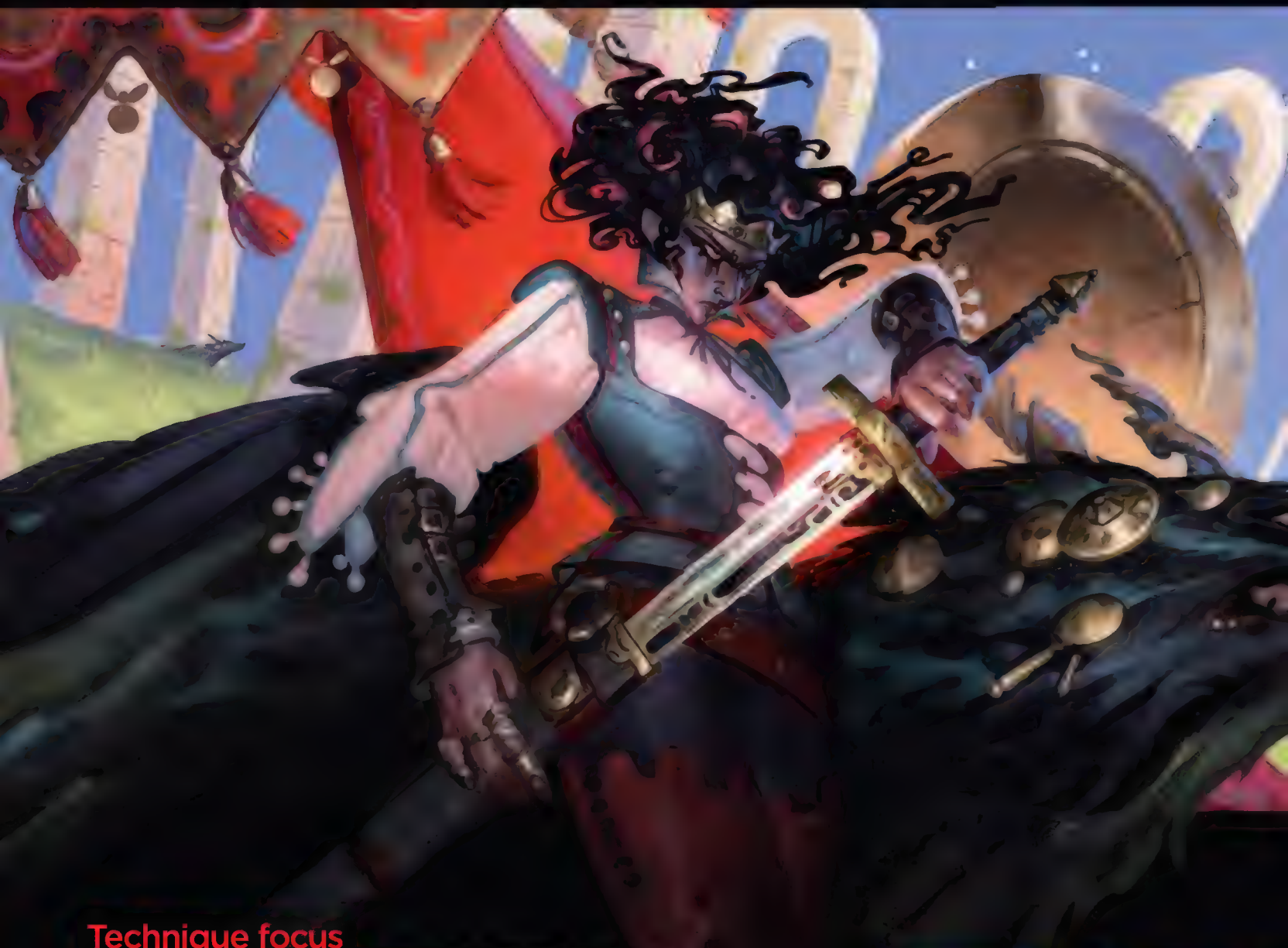
13 Create atmosphere with effects

To complete the scene, pump up the atmosphere by adding depth through value adjustments. I also added fog to my image to enhance the mood and evoke a cold sensation, plus a warm glow to the lamps for contrast. The blue flames were also developed with highlights using the Multitask Soft and Fire brushes.



14 Make the last adjustments

Finally, I want to tie everything together and enhance the image to look as good as possible. For example, you can adjust the contrast and values using a Levels layer, tweak the colours with a Color Balance layer, or intensify colour with an Overlay layer. These are subtle adjustments that finalise everything. ●



Technique focus

CREATE TENSION WITH CONTRAST

Laura Rosmaninho explores an intense narrative by utilising big impact to spur viewer curiosity



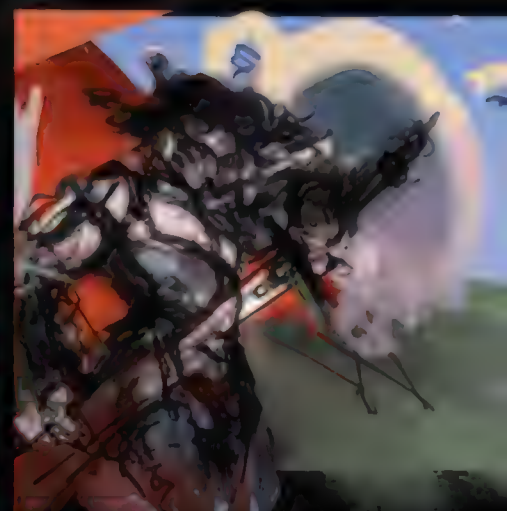
"This was a piece for Unreal Bjornament 4, an art contest hosted by Bjorn Hurri. I set out to explore building a narrative with dramatic effect, all in a single image. To create impact, I played with contrast, both in values and context. With only one human

face in the composition, the eye is naturally drawn to it. Despite not knowing the surrounding story, the expression and pose – anger pushed to the edge of violence – creates tension that invites curiosity, making the image resonate beyond its visual elements and encourage the viewer to imagine the world behind it."

Artist PROFILE

Laura Rosmaninho
LOCATION: Portugal

Laura is a concept artist and illustrator working for Blizzard, Opus Artz and Disney Lorcana. She loves worldbuilding and exploring stories through her paintings.
<https://bit.ly/4lwvrz6>





How I create...

AN IMAGE BURSTING WITH STORY



1 Set the stage

The start of a painting is always rough. It's important to be loose and not too tied to anything while still stating your intention. A lot will change throughout the process, but the start will mostly impact a painting through to the end. So take your time to really consider the contrast and composition of your elements.



2 Decision time

This step is for pinning down and solidifying ideas – the transition between the initial vision and concrete choices. Organising everything in layers is vital at this stage. It provides some wiggle room to experiment with values, colours and positioning, then you can slowly build a base for the final render.



3 Finalise the scene

The last step is more than clearing up. There's always room for change no matter the stage, so take this opportunity to reconsider and refine ideas to enhance the picture. Those extra bits of design can sneak in – such as texture, engravings and props – that add so much to a piece and really pack this punch of worldbuilding.



Photoshop COMPOSE A FLUENT PAINTING

Emanuel Dias shares the details of how he developed a giant robot and his hoverbike-riding companion

Artist PROFILE

Emanuel Dias
LOCATION: Brazil

Emanuel has been a passionate artist for as long as he can recall. He began studying drawing and painting in 2018, and has continued to search for his artistic voice to help express the way he sees life and the world.
<https://bit.ly/45DRUpn>



This image of a big robot – which I still haven't been able to come up with a good name for – started out

as an unpretentious sketch for the mentoring I did in 2023 with Joon Ahn. At the time it was a sketch that had an interesting composition, and I liked its dynamism and initial look, where it included both very large and very small elements.

I wanted to explore my ability to conceive an illustration further while creating a functional, well-thought design rather than painting for the sake of it without a focus.

At the time, I'd already been thinking about starting a course to demonstrate my painting process for scenes, and to help other artists understand how I solve paintings. They always start out differently to how they finish, though I usually still like the final results.

In this image, I also wanted to create strong contrast between light and dark, and warm and cool areas, using complementary colours and other tools to generate a striking, memorable focal point. Gunning for that level of contrast has always helped me when trying to work out a strong composition.

FUTURISTIC FRIENDS



Sense of grandeur

As you can see, I wanted the colours in my composition to create strong contrast. I opted for complementary yellows with blue-greens, as the blue works well for dark values and the yellow for lighter values such as the vehicle. One thing that helps with the sense of scale and amplifies the image is that the robot has no details in the shadows, mainly due to the atmospheric perspective and use of smoke. The idea is to show a sense of scale and grandeur in the shot using these devices.

Cloud cover

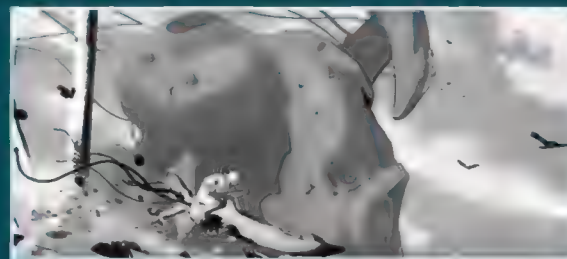
I love clouds and smoke, and always keep an eye out for references and good smoke or cloud brushes. The Smudge tool is great for creating smooth transitions for these elements, while an Outer Glow on clouds can provide an interesting, artistic look.

Get your glow on

To create this electrical exhaust effect, I started by thinking about the direction of the design and creating a sense of thick to thin for interest. I also use the Outer Glow technique here; it's great for lightning, magic and sci-fi style effects. The possibilities are almost endless!

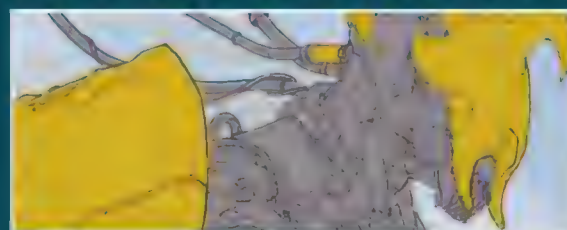
How I create...

EFFECTIVE SCI-FI COMPOSITIONS



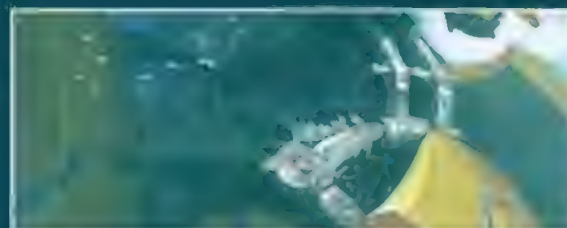
1 Place down the basics

Before starting, I had the idea of creating contrast by having the vehicle in the foreground look bigger than the robot figure in the background. At the same time, I wanted matching shapes present in both the vehicle and the robot to form a relationship. I start with a basic line sketch and brushwork, and sometimes a texture brush for rocks or trees. It's key for me to visualise the image before I begin, then try to get the feeling I want quickly.



2 Push the style

I drew everything in a pragmatic way beforehand to help me get a good understanding of the perspective and shape design, especially the robot. The goal was to make it feel like Transformers, which led to me looking at a lot of cars, engines, planes and so on - anything that could help me create a less sophisticated robot. As a result, my design uses interesting shapes in the yellow areas, and more functional elements in the darker parts.



3 Shadows and light

Towards the end of the image I'm working with few values and creating obvious contrast between light and shadow. For me, they are totally distinct. This helps me create the luminosity I need, especially the bluish colour in the shadow that's taken from the sky in order to contribute to the depth and remove a little contrast. The hard edges and most emphatic details are in light. We always need to decide where to put details and where not to; when we'll shout and when we won't.

Hints of humanity

To create the big robot and some complex areas, I like to design separately. In this case I used a lot of references from excavators and other big mechanical objects to understand how they function, and then make a combination of them in a somewhat human appearance - the collarbone, neck muscles, and so on. As a result, I built a look that I hadn't considered beforehand. I've always struggled with this, but good research and persistence certainly brings good results.

Engine upgrade

When finishing up the image, I felt there were areas for improvement. Looking at the vehicle, I noticed that this part of the engine, where the spokes and turbo jets come out, didn't have any interesting design elements despite being quite large. I needed more information about how that object interacts with the lighting in an interesting way. I did a basic redesign with cubes and cylinders, then painted over it for a good result. Never be afraid to redo parts of your image you don't feel are right. They all contribute to the final scene, and you won't have any regrets if you've done your best.



Technique focus

FOCUS ON VALUE DURING DESIGN

Michael Darjania tells us about his mindset when building up striking fantasy concepts



"Soulsteel is a living suit of armour forged through sacrifice during a war that tore through three intertwined realms. Inspired by Dark Souls and epic dark fantasy,

this concept piece balances brutality with tragedy. I started with in-depth research and exploratory sketches to capture the essence and composition, then used 3D tools such as Blender and ZBrush to establish strong perspectives and forms. I painted the values in black and white to create a solid structure before layering colour and rendering in Photoshop. By not rushing into colour straight away, I was able to focus on the value design that's at the heart of a compelling illustration."

Artist PROFILE

Michael Darjania

LOCATION: Georgia

Michael is a digital artist at Elanor Studios who has co-created artwork and designs with a love for fantasy and sci-fi. He crafts epic atmospheric worlds and characters. www.michael-darjania.com



How I create...

DARK FANTASY CONCEPT ART



1 Explore composition and mood

I began with sketches focused on silhouette, posture and story. The goal wasn't precision but energy. I aligned the character's personality to the background, making sure their pose and atmosphere felt a dramatic force. Planning the emotion filter to provide the peak.



2 Build value and structure

Once the sketch was in place, I moved to black and white painting to establish a strong value structure. I used Blender and ZBrush selectively, mainly the helmet and sword, to ensure correct form and perspective. Building solid light and shadow before adding colour guided the eye and strengthened the composition.



3 Add colour and make a final pass

With values locked in, I moved to colour using Photoshop, adjusting lighting and adding mood with magical purple effects. Zooming out helped maintain clarity. In the final rendering stage, I refined textures, added glow and power effects, and polished visual polish while constantly checking my values.

Photoshop

INK CONCEPT ART WITH COMIC STYLE

Art director **Matt Sanz** walks through his process for speedily rendering video game concepts with a classic comic look

Artist PROFILE

Matt Sanz
LOCATION: WYOMING

Matt is an Art Director at a game company and has worked on several AAA titles. He is currently working on a new game and is looking for a challenge.

GET YOUR RESOURCES
See page 5 for more



I like to use a comic inking and rendering style when creating quick concepts, often done for video game

or animation projects.

This particular style has a host of benefits, one of which is almost immediately creating high contrast in key areas. This forces you into good habits such as breaking down the image into value groups, creating strong key lighting and crafting well-defined forms, which can be difficult for a lot of beginner artists.

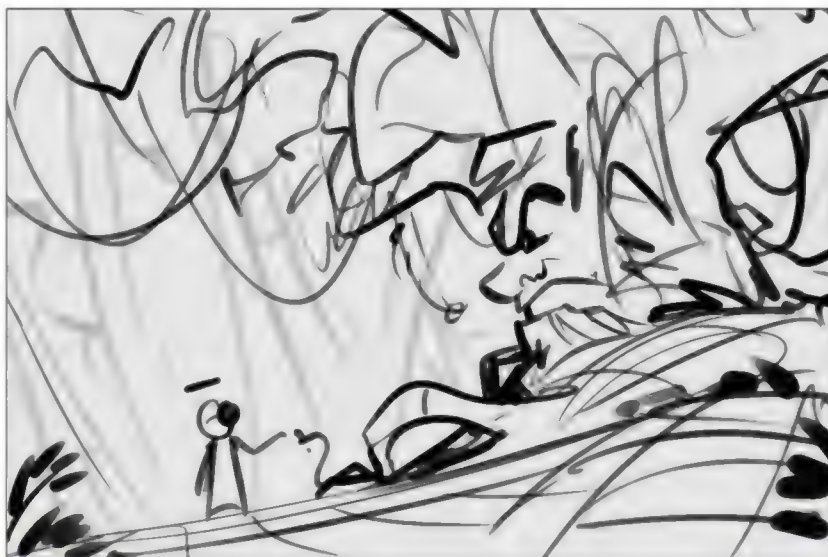
I'll be discussing how I lay down the foundations for this kind of rendering and how each early step you take sets the foundation for the later ones to be completed more

efficiently. Of course, there are many alternative routes to the same outcome, but I've found following this process particularly effective for getting a final rendered image completed quickly.

The biggest difference might come from understanding that the black ink work can do a lot of the heavy lifting when it comes to rendering. But while that's true, there are simple tricks we can use to push and pull that ink shadowing around that will benefit the final image. You'll find this particularly in the latter stages when we get to masking, overlays and additional polishing layers.

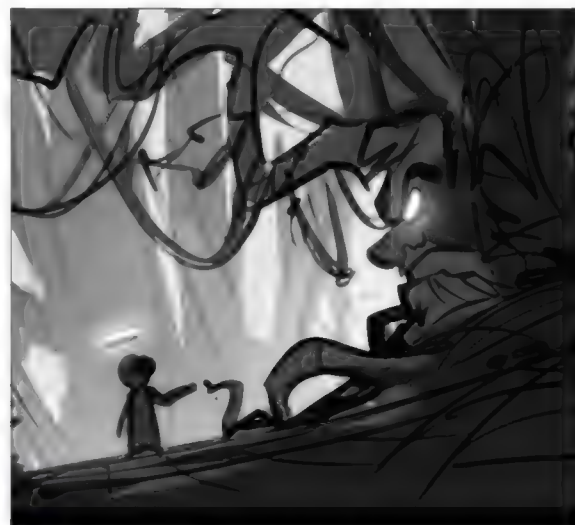
Hopefully you'll find yourself adopting some of these techniques into your own workflow!





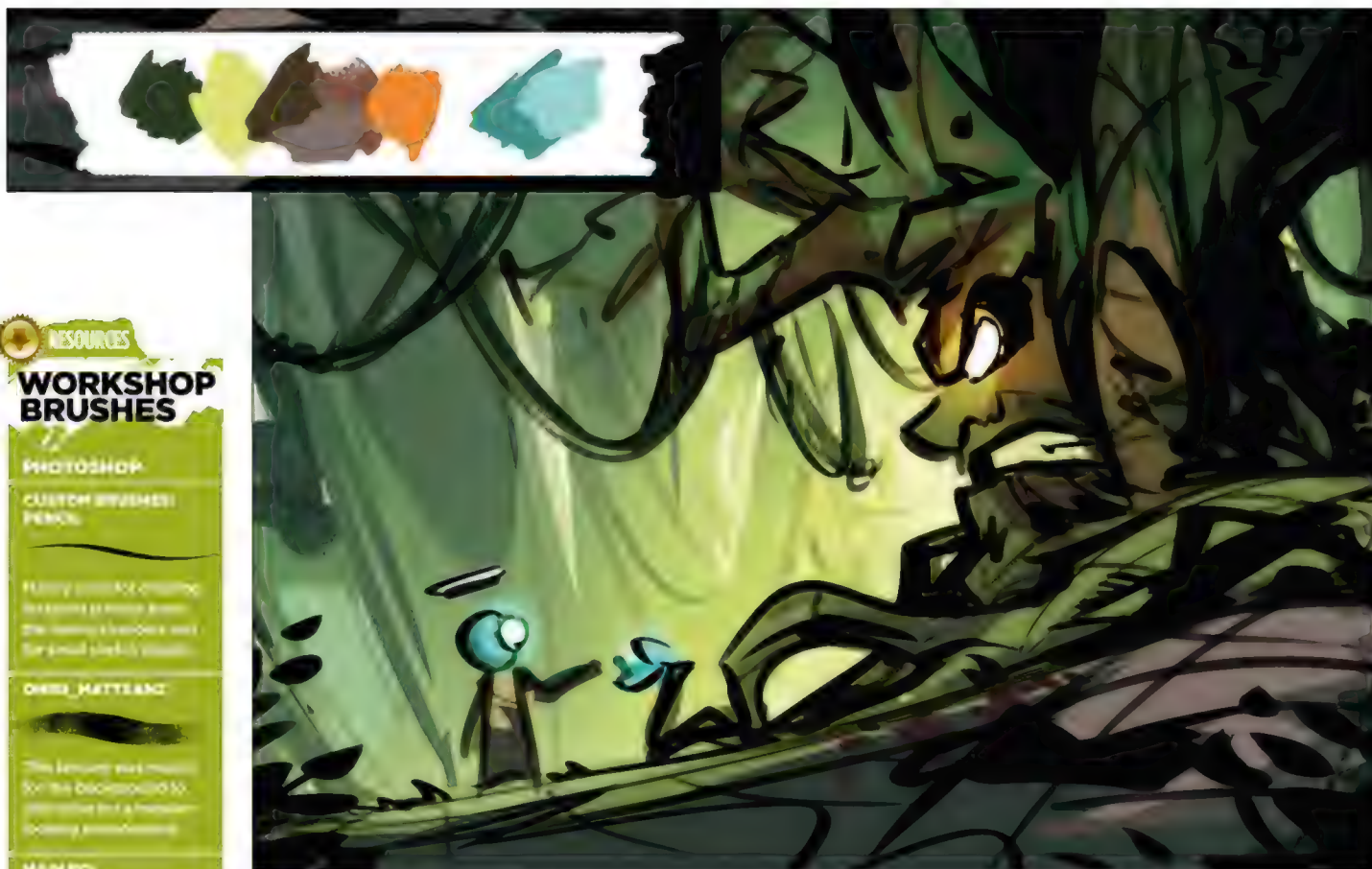
1 Create an initial sketch and thumbnail

Ideas can come from anywhere and it's wise to draw several thumbnails to conceptualise an initial idea or brief. Getting the first five or so ideas down on paper is beneficial, although in this case I already had a good idea of what I wanted to go for. I used my Main Boi brush to get a sketch of a botanist robot collecting flowers that grow around a mischievous ancient tree.



2 Consider the value key and lighting

Using the same sketch, create two or three new layers and started separating the values into groups. This creates a defined background and middle, and potentially a foreground. By keeping the values to a simplified range of 2-3 per layer, we can ensure the value layers remain visually separated too.



3 Develop a colour key for tone

Colour keys are great for setting the tone alongside the previous value key for lighting. For my piece, I stuck with a simple triadic palette of a range of greens and dipped into complementary accents for the blue and orange elements, which will be focused on glowing areas. You can also start incorporating alternative brushes at this stage to make the colour variation easier. Also start to think about the shadow placement.





4 Draw a line sketch

The clean line sketch is probably the most important early-stage step. This is where the design solidifies and is usually part of the final render. That's why we should take our time here, using line drawing techniques to finalise the design in its simplest form so it has the strongest foundations for the later stages.



5 Begin the inking

The style really comes to life here. By concentrating on inking the shadows, which is essentially ambient occlusion, we can use huge sections of black to reduce the amount of rendering needed and solidify the form through silhouettes. Focus on creating dynamic mini shapes within the larger composition and always bear in mind the direction of your lighting. Since my piece is somewhat backlit, I also added shapes in the foreground that were filled with ink.



6 Clean up

Now we have our ink, it's time to clean it up and lay out our basic masks and layers ready for painting. Break these into key shapes followed by material separation. For example, my larger tree character will be one big shape and layer, while the vines, moss, eyes and leaves are placed on top with an alpha channel mask.



7 Fill out shapes with flat colours

Next, efficiently apply flat local colours to the layers. Using the colour key as a guide in the top-left corner, you can keep a constant reminder of where you want the piece to end up. Sometimes things can change during this organic process; for example, I added the blue vines growing out from the tree to add more connection and leading lines between it and the robot character. >>>



8 Add colours and initial tones

Now comes the start of the real painting process! Using a soft round brush, start playing with your values and tones. For me, that meant applying illuminated tones, dappling additional lighting to the grass floor, and adding some soft glows around the blue flower. I also started to block out the least important part of the image, the background, to get a sense of the level of detail required.



9 Render the background

Duplicate and flatten the non-essential layers here so you don't paint more than you need. By simply filling them in with black, it allows you to focus on the background rendering. I wanted my background to be super painterly, so I mostly used the Onibi_Mattsanz brush and wasn't very precise about the accuracy of the details, as I knew it would benefit from contrasting with the main focus layers.

BEFORE



AFTER



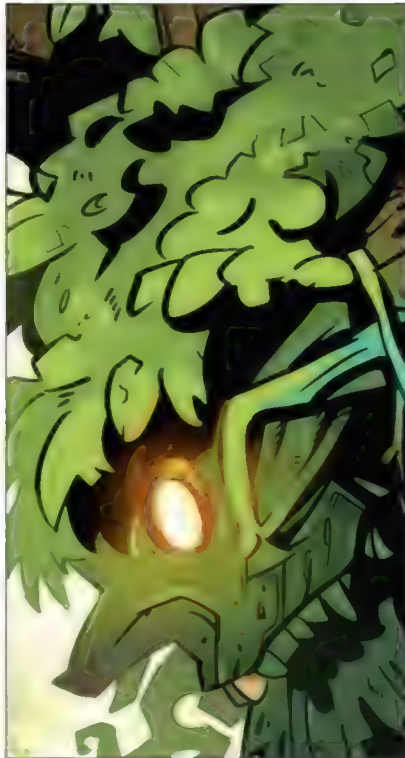
10 Soften the ink

This is where we sell the style. By creating an alpha channel mask on top of the line-art and ink layer, we can now fill it with colour while keeping the shape. I often do this to reduce focus by softening the heavy black, or artificially creating a sense of illumination by having the object be so bright that it illuminates its own line-art. Play around with the Linear Dodge, Overlay or Colour Dodge blends to find what works best for you!



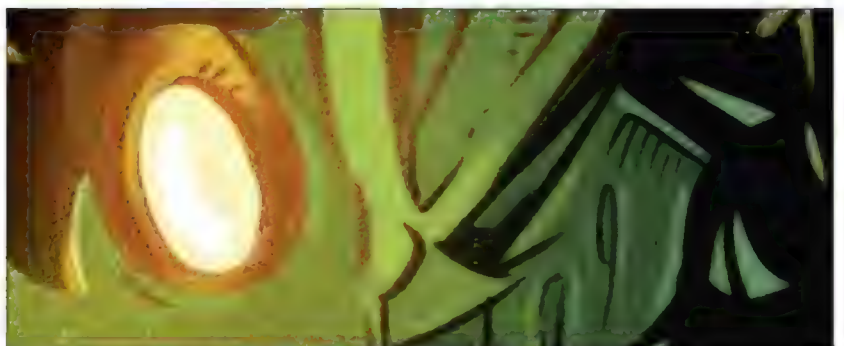
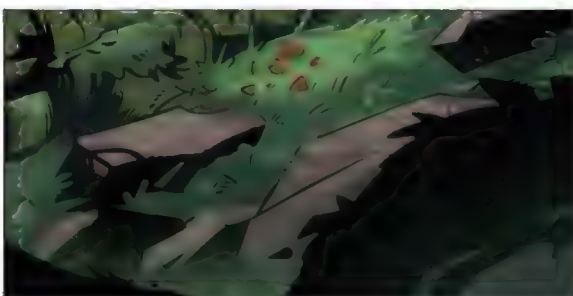
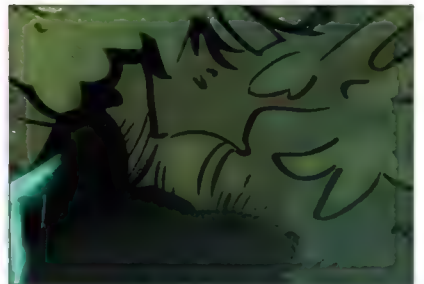
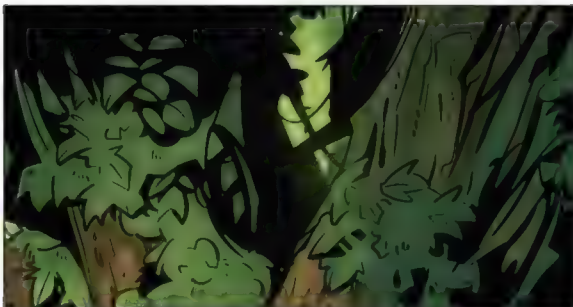
11 Tweak in between values

Some actual painting comes into play here. Now that everything is well on its way, we can paint in some colour variation such as lighting direction details. I don't usually paint much variation, and almost keep to a three-band cel shading look, as it helps contrast against the busy background and stands out. My Main Boi brush is great here just for blending transfer colours. Pick the colours to ensure you don't lose saturation!



12 Polish the glows and materials

Once the bulk of the painting work is complete, you can turn to the layer options again to create glow on some of the lighting areas using Colour Dodge. Make sure to repeat the same effect on the ink layer so the glow really burns into the black ink and shines. Any metal areas would react slightly differently, but as you can see, I still kept to a simple amount of colours and values.



13 Break the mould

Because we've kept everything on such clean layers, we can now select the main ink layer and use black to break up the silhouette a little more with additional details, like the vines, leaves and so on in my artwork. Keep pushing and pulling to see what feels right in your piece. You can even push back with some black ink in the softening layer, as I did for the vine in the foreground.

14 Add the last elements

With one final layer on top of everything else, completely ignore the foundations we built and simply and efficiently go over the entire piece with the Pencil brush, adding in extra details without the restrictions of the existing layers. This allows for creative, expressionist details to be created without your layers getting out of hand. You can also add a noise layer to cement the comic-style rendering as it would appear in the printing process. ●



Technique focus

LEAD WITH IDEAS AND NARRATIVES

Concept artist **Sathish Kumar** shares the details on the process and inspirations for his designs



"The goal for these illustrations was to experiment with the brushwork, colour and storytelling – as well as to have fun! Each sketch reflects a subject that caught my eye, whether it's a quiet forest path or a mood that resonated with me in some way.

My process begins with finding a reference for inspiration. Then I write a one-line story or idea to guide the concept and draw a quick thumbnail to keep loose and efficient. Once I've settled on a composition, I do quick colour sketches to explore moods and palettes. After the overall feel is locked, I render the final image." ●

How I create...

NEW CONCEPTS



1 Sketch a first draft

I tend to sketch quickly on paper so I find it helps to keep the sketches simple and efficient by capturing the composition altogether. I'm not trying to make a pretty picture this early in the process. I'm trying to put my ideas onto paper so I can then flesh them out later.

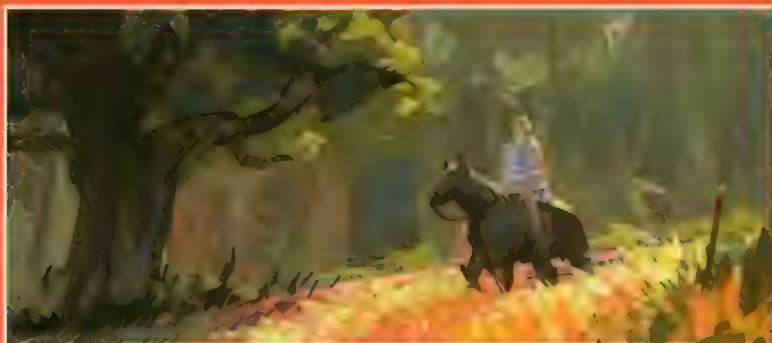


Artist PROFILE

Sathish Kumar

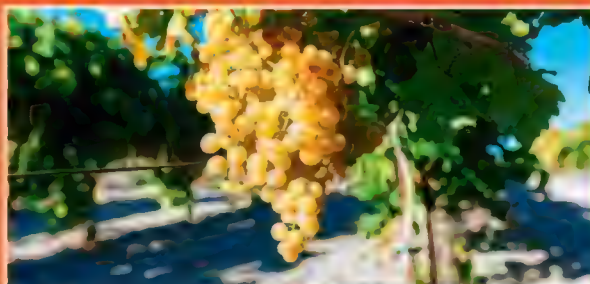
LOCATION: India

Sathish is a senior concept artist who has worked with Microsoft, Nintendo and Naughty Dog. As the founder of Art Train Academy, he helps people level up their concept art skills. <https://bit.ly/44mx7Wm>



2 Develop the image

Thumbnail sketches also stop me getting too bogged down in details. If a concept isn't working, I can just discard it and start again. This approach also stops me getting too attached to a single idea. At this stage I'm still playing with different moods and lighting variations to enhance the story.



3 Draw from real life

Inspiration can come from anywhere. Even an image of grapes can influence my colour palette. True artistry lies in how we choose to interpret and transform the world that surrounds us and channel it into our work. It's something that drives my sketches, which each have their own focus, whether that's the story, colour or brushwork.

Reviews



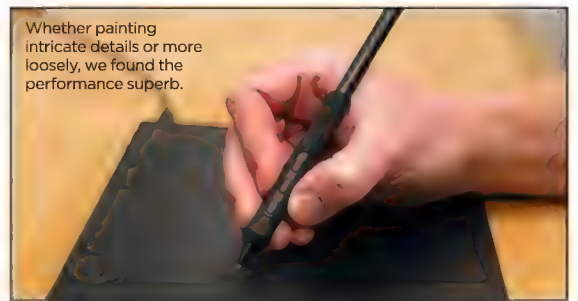
The latest digital art resources are put to the test by the ImagineFX team...

Artist's Choice Award
Art resources with a five-star rating receive the ImagineFX Artist's Choice award!

© Wacom



The matt-finish screen didn't collect many fingerprints during our testing.



Whether painting intricate details or more loosely, we found the performance superb.

© Wacom



Take the new Pro Pen 3 apart and customise it to you.

Wacom Intuos Pro (2025)

WONDERFUL REINVENTION The newest tablet in Wacom's catalogue and its customisable stylus make for a fantastic addition to any professional's setup

Price From £230/\$250 **Company** Wacom **Web** www.wacom.com

Despite reviewing and testing drawing tablets all the time, we found something uniquely exciting about the latest from Wacom. And after using this year's Intuos Pro release, we can honestly say it remains the gold standard for pen tablets in 2025.

This new Intuos Pro – we tested the medium iteration – is a precise and beautifully designed drawing tablet that will remain the go-to choice for digital art pros despite increasingly stiff competition from brands like XP-Pen, Huion and Xencelabs.

Fundamentally, this new Intuos Pro is a radical reinvention of the older

The skinny tablet weighs up to 660g and has a sloped design that ranges from 4-7mm thick.

tablet line. Everything is refined – it's thinner and lighter, the drawing area larger, and the touch ring has been replaced by analogue dials.

SLEEK DESIGN

Wacom's hardware aesthetic hasn't changed much in years – matt black, low-profile, understated – but things have been shaken up a little here. While the familiar look and feel remains, Wacom has rejigged the Express Keys to the top of the tablet and sunk them into four dials: two analogue and two button layouts.

It took us a little time to adjust to having the dials and radial menus at the top of the tablet and not in the standard side position. While there is a trend to move shortcut keys to remote



The Wacom Center app can be used to adjust a range of functions to suit your personal preferences.

© Wacom

devices, it's nice to have them on-frame, which also means there's no extra gadget to buy. That said, they can feel cramped as you reach around and above to access them.

The drawing surface is incredibly smooth, as expected. You would imagine such a smooth matt finish would be a fingerprint magnet, but





a fantastic idea. And this stylus has Wacom's classic tapered cone nib to rest your fingers too.

The grip customisation is welcome if you have specific ergonomic needs or hand fatigue issues. You can shift the centre of gravity or bulk up the grip for balance. The side button module was a bit fiddly, removing and replacing the buttons requires care, and they don't always click in with confidence.

Looking at the specs, the Pro Pen 3 remains a top-tier stylus. You get 8,192 levels of pressure, 60-degree tilt, lag-free input, and no battery to worry about. While rivals like XPPen and Huion offer styluses with 16K pressure levels it can be unnecessary, especially for hobbyists. It's arguably the best stylus Wacom has ever made, and while the modularity may sound like a gimmick, in practice it's a nice way to make sure everything clicks.

UNDER THE HOOD

The supposed 16-hour battery life – though we found it closer to 12 hours – along with improved Bluetooth is a boon for a tablet designed to be flexible and portable.

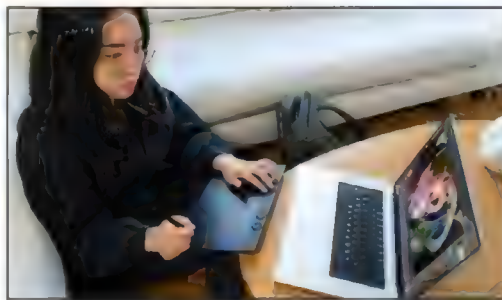
On both macOS and Windows, the Intuos Pro is recognised within seconds of plugging in. However, it's worth noting that unlike other drawing tablets in this size and price range, this Wacom can't be used with Android or ChromeOS devices.

Bluetooth pairing is quick and painless, and the connection stability is excellent, with no noticeable input lag when working wirelessly. This is a multi-Bluetooth tablet, meaning it can be set up on multiple laptops at once.

The Wacom Center app, meanwhile, is clean, responsive, and far easier to navigate than past versions. Mapping keys, adjusting pressure curves, and tweaking pen button functions takes minutes. You can also create app-specific profiles, so your setup for Photoshop can differ from the setup for Blender or Rebelle.

The Wacom Intuos Pro is for creatives who use a drawing tablet daily, and those who also need a tablet that can slip into a bag and be taken out of the home or studio to the office. It's beginner-friendly enough to appeal to newcomers, but the price could put off some newer artists. Alternatives from XPPen and Huion cater well for those seeking a budget tablet. ●

Ian Dean



“The new Pro Pen 3 is Wacom's most ambitious stylus redesign for years and a step toward modular customisation”

the surface doesn't get messy even with long, extended use. The body is rigid and slim, with durable aluminium backing. It doesn't flex and sits flat and stable on a desk or even on your lap. Overall, the tablet feels premium, and its design and construction are sturdy.

The pen pressure curve is smooth, and tilt support works especially well in apps like Photoshop and Rebelle. The 5,080 LPI means you'll feel the advantage when drawing close and detailed line work. With precise edge-to-edge tracking, the Intuos Pro performs excellently whether you're trying tight detail work like a fantasy character or loose painterly sketches.

As well as the typical precision and accuracy associated with Wacom, it's the wealth of custom options that will appeal, especially to pro artists who like to tinker and have things just

so. The radial menu buttons can be assigned shortcuts, as expected, and the dials are used to zoom and scroll your art, but you can also go into the Wacom driver and adjust the speed with which this works.

CUSTOMISABLE STYLUS

The Pro Pen 3 is Wacom's most ambitious stylus redesign for years and a clear step towards modular customisation, making it a unique stylus among brands that stick to the tried and trusted designs.

With swappable grips, customisable side switches and interchangeable weight inserts, you can fine-tune the Pro Pen 3 to suit how you like to work. Styluses all take some getting used to – too slim, too heavy, too light, too fat, too bulky, or too obstructive – so being able to tailor a stylus to you is

Bluetooth capability means you can connect with no wires needed.

VERDICT

A beautifully designed drawing tablet with bags of customisation and the build quality Wacom is known for – the 2025 Intuos Pro is one of the best tablets we've used

Pros
 ■ Precise control
 ■ Excellent options for customisation
 ■ Pro Pen 3 is superb

Cons
 ■ Tablet is missing a USB-A adapter

Rating
 ★★★★★

© Microsoft

While the Pro 12 is found lacking for graphical power, the screen is still a reasonable effort.



The Pro 12's two USB-C ports beat the iPad Pro's connectivity, but USB 3.2 is a disappointment.



There's a definite Android resemblance with the power/lock and volume buttons on the tablet.

Microsoft Surface Pro 12

BETWEEN TWO WORLDS Part tablet and part laptop, the entry-level Surface machine is a versatile and portable piece of kit for completing everyday tasks

Price From £800/\$800 **Company** Microsoft **Web** www.microsoft.com

Let's get this straight: the **Surface Pro is not the Surface Laptop. Where that computer is designed to take on the MacBooks of this world, the Pro is a less formal thing. It's a tablet, really, and doesn't even come with a keyboard, stylus or a charger as standard, they have to be added and cost extra.**

As a tablet with a stylus for drawing and notes, it's more of a competitor to the iPad Pro, or even the M3 iPad Air than it is to something like the Dell Pro 13. It's a touchscreen device that runs a desktop operating system, and comes with a nice screen and all-day battery life. It's the entry-level Surface, but a nice tablet-laptop to use.

Many of the features are software-based, and we're still not sure about Windows 11 as a tablet interface. Yes, it hides the taskbar behind an upward

swipe and there's an on-screen keyboard, but the Tablet Mode toggle is gone from the Action Center, and double-tapping desktop icons to open them feels alien. Everything on the desktop is just a bit small for fingertip operation, and apps don't run full-screen by default.

There are settings for pen pressure too, opening it up for digital painting, and the Surface Pen – not included by default – has a precision tip with an eraser at the other end, and can be customised with downloadable 3D-printed grip designs.

The eight-core Snapdragon X Plus processor is a year old. That's about the gap between the Apple M3 and M4, or the first and second gens of Intel Core Ultra processors, so we'd expect X2 chips any time soon. It scored well in office tasks and handled the Photoshop tests well however,

A stand is built into the back, as is a recess to store the stylus, should you buy one separately.



VERDICT

Microsoft's latest...
 - Excellent battery life
 - Great screen & display
 - Good build & design
 - Excellent for work
 - Good for creative work
 - Good for gaming
 - Good for entertainment

Pros
 - Battery life
 - Screen & display
 - Build & design
 - Work performance
 - Creative performance
 - Gaming performance
 - Entertainment performance

Cons
 - No keyboard included
 - No stylus included
 - No charger included
 - No USB-A ports
 - No SD card slot
 - No Wi-Fi 6E
 - No 5G

Rating
 ★★★★★

setting the Surface Pro out as a useful little tablet-laptop to have around, but not a creative powerhouse with GPU strength lacking. There are issues with ARM-native software. Photoshop and Illustrator will run, but Premiere Pro and InDesign are still beta versions.

The screen is a reasonably bright touch panel, not an OLED, but still puts out 442 nits of brightness, and will display 96% of sRGB, 72% of AdobeRGB, and 71% of P3 from our tests. Battery life came out at over 14 hours in our looping video trial. The HP EliteBook managed more, but this is about average for 2025.

Ian Evenden

“It's a touchscreen device that runs a desktop operating system, and has a nice screen and all-day battery life”

Everything is ready to go out of the box, but some consumables will need replacing.

© eufyMake



eufyMake E1 UV Printer

NEXT-GEN PRINTING

Innovative tech offers top results for creatives

Price £2,250/\$2,500

Company eufyMake

Web www.eufymake.com

RATING ★★★★★

2D printers have been around for so long that not much has moved on with the technology in some time. Things are changing, though, and eufyMake is leading that charge with its E1 UV printer.

Billed as a business in a box, this printer allows you to print images on just about any material you care to think of. Not only that, but it also promises to print on multiple shapes, from the perfectly flat to completely round, like glasses and coffee cups. And to make the E1 even more appealing, it can also print with depth, add a gloss finish and much more. For creators and artists, this opens up a whole world of possibilities such as selling more individual prints and merch.

The E1 is large but manageable. It has a similar footprint to a normal desktop printer but sits a little taller to allow room for thicker materials and its rotary attachment. It's worth noting that although the footprint is reasonable, when in use you need extra space to the front and rear as the print bed moves. An additional 40cm front and back is enough.

We tried out printing on a range of materials including canvas, wood and ceramic, with each impressive. Printing on glass was a brand new experience but also came out well. Another trick of the E1 is texture printing up to 5mm depth.

Rob Redman

HP EliteBook X G1i

STANDING ON BUSINESS An office-grade laptop that offers surprisingly good ability for creative tasks and long battery life

Price £1,600/\$2,850 **Company** HP **Web** www.hp.com

The business laptop may not be of particular interest to the creative user. But when it's one like this, your ears might prick up.

The EliteBook X G1i bucks the trend with a second-generation Intel Core Ultra 7 at its heart. This means you'll have no problems installing Creative Cloud apps on it, and it comes with a better GPU than Snapdragon chips can manage. It's still an integrated graphics solution, but it's good enough for most tasks, making it a viable laptop for photo editing or a good video-editing device.

There's a full-size HDMI 2.1 port, and you can also use a dock or an adapter on one of the Thunderbolt 4 ports to hook up an external monitor. And you might want to, as while the screen is a nice one, with a 3K resolution and the usual OLED colours and brightness, it's still a 14-inch model. With 454 nits of brightness, it's vivid and has the contrast you'd expect from an OLED. It's slightly behind the curve for colour display, however, managing 99% of the sRGB gamut but only 76% of AdobeRGB and 77% of P3.

The Core Ultra 7 258V is one of Intel's Lunar Lake chips and a nice step up on first-gen Ultra processors. It's nicely power efficient when it's not



The trackpad is accurate and offers good feedback, while the keyboard is a nice typing experience.

being made to work hard, which is reflected in the enormous 21-hour battery life while playing a looping video with the screen on all the time.

The CPU is an eight-core model; four of them performance cores and the rest low-power efficient cores. This means more battery life at the expense of a little performance, which is a trade-off that's worth making – the performance cores will fire up when you start taxing the chip.

From our testing the X G1i was beaten across the board by the Apple M4 chip in the MacBook Air 15-inch, but came closer to the Snapdragon X1 in the ASUS Zenbook A14, edged out during CPU tests but performing better on graphics processing ability.

Interestingly, it features Windows Recall, which captures snapshots as you work for potential reference.

Ian Evenden

VERDICT

A laptop that can keep going for two days, or even more, is a wonderful thing. The EliteBook G1i is sold as a business machine, but has enough of a GPU to handle most creative tasks, though it will be slower than a discrete chip.

Pros

- Superb battery life
- Lots of ports
- Bright OLED screen

Cons

- Integrated GPU
- Colour gamut is rather limited

Rating

★★★★★



As well as being a portable option, the EliteBook X G1i also has some potency to it.

© HP



The display offers detail in stunning 4K, plus vivid colour production and a 1,500:1 contrast ratio.



The monitor has HDMI and DisplayPort connections available, although a USB-C option is unfortunately lacking from the port selection.



Cables can be hidden away with a snap-on case on the rear of the monitor.

Dell 27 Plus 4K

PLUS POINTS A top-tier screen that brings together performance and value in a great all-round monitor

Price £300/\$300 **Company** Dell **Web** www.dell.com

Looking for a monitor that's large enough to give you ample screen real estate without swamping your desk? A 27-inch model is the perfect size and the Dell 27 Plus 4K S2725QS won't disappoint.

Of course, the biggest feature is the display, which is perfect for work or entertainment. It's 4K UHD, which offers sharp, detailed visuals. It also has a 120Hz refresh rate for smooth motion – ideal if you're editing video content or gaming.

It uses IPS panel technology and has 99% sRGB colour coverage, so you get good viewing angles as well as vibrant, true-to-life colours. There's HDR support too, which enhances the colour and gives off deep blacks and brighter whites.

The stand is fully adjustable. It can be adjusted for height, tilt, swivel and

pivot so you can find your perfect viewing setup. This largely works smoothly, though pivoting can be a challenge at times.

Dell has never been that exciting when it comes to design but the Plus 4K actually looks good. It has an ash white finish with ultra-thin bezels, so you get to view the full screen.

Setting up is straightforward too. The stand locks into place without the need for any tools, and then you just hook it up to your computer or laptop via HDMI or DisplayPort. A USB-C connection would have been ideal, especially for those with MacBooks, but it's not too much effort to use a hub. You'll also find a security lock slot to stop it being moved or stolen if you're using it in public, though we're not too sure how many people are carrying around their 27-inch monitor when they leave the house for work.

Adjust the stand to suit you with a range of options to perfect the height, angle and more.



VERDICT

The Dell 27 Plus 4K is the perfect solution for anyone looking to upgrade to a 4K monitor without breaking the bank. It's a good all-rounder, suited to professional creatives and casual users who want sharp visuals and excellent colour accuracy out of the box.

Pros

- 4K resolution
- Anti-glare screen
- Adjustable height and swivel

Cons

- Shockingly bad built-in audio
- Rotating the display can be difficult

Rating



Dell also claims this monitor has ComfortView Plus Technology, which is supposed to reduce harmful blue light emissions without an impact on colour accuracy. During testing we used it for long periods without getting tired eyes.

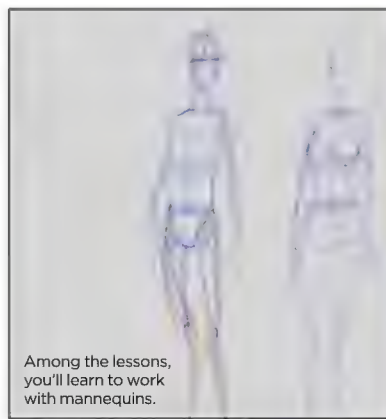
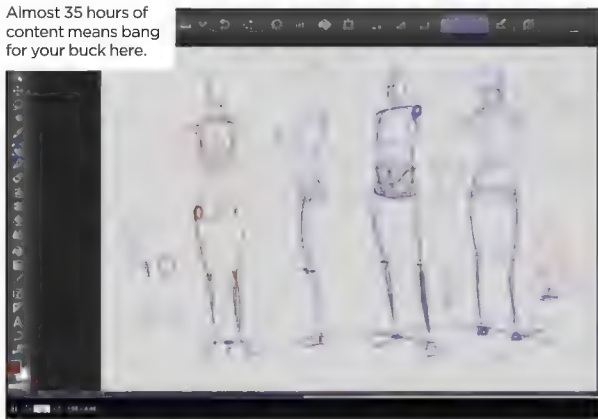
The integrated 5W speakers are notably loud and blaring even at low settings. We could only get up to 50% volume before it became impossible to hear details of what was playing and without it shaking the walls.

The monitor is reasonably priced for what you get, with 32 and 34-inch models also available from Dell.

Rachael Penn

“You get good viewing angles as well as vibrant, true-to-life colours, plus HDR support to enhance blacks and whites”

Almost 35 hours of content means bang for your buck here.



Among the lessons, you'll learn to work with mannequins.

Complete Beginner's Guide to Anatomy and Figure Drawing Pt 1

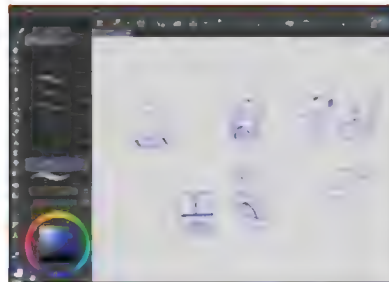
BODY BUILDING Rich Grayson's video course offers a thorough introduction to anatomy for any level, but may not suit everyone

Publisher Udemy **Price** £49.99/\$109.99 or part of Udemy Subscription from £180/\$168 per year
Format Online **Length** 34hrs 49mins **Web** www.udemy.com

Rich Grayson's anatomy course is exactly the kind of comprehensive deep dive that either immerses or repulses potential students - there's no middle ground in this extensive library of knowledge.

At 35 hours of content, this isn't a "how do I do that quickly, please" kind of course; it's a big commitment. The programme was heavily revised in 2022, which is always a good sign that the tutor cares about students and what they're teaching.

The structure - which starts with the basics and progresses through the bones, muscles and so on - is more akin to an evening college course as you work along with the tutor and learn by doing. Rich talks as he draws in a conversational manner, which the more inexperienced artists who prefer



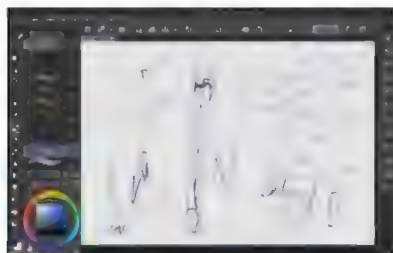
The instructional videos offer great detail on drawing various body parts.

immersion will love, but those hoping for a more structured approach may find maddening.

While a wide range of digital software is used, this shouldn't be seen as digital-only. The techniques would work equally well with a sketchbook and pencil. The course caters to absolute beginners, with Rich providing context like muscle wrapping, which he demonstrates with little videos of paper muscles. This approach truly explains what's happening anatomically rather than just telling someone "this is how to draw this" without providing them the underlying knowledge.

As the course title suggests, this is comprehensive and resources are supplied on a lesson-by-lesson basis where they're applicable. ●

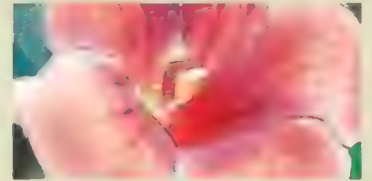
Mike Griggs



Course tutor Rich Grayson has more courses on Udemy, including a follow-up to anatomy.

Brushing up...

We put three packs through their paces to find out whether they're worth downloading



Jackpack Realwater Legacy Brushes

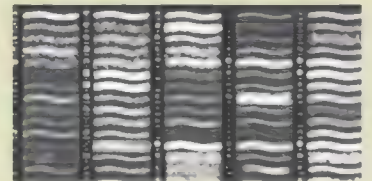
Artist Jack The Vulture

Software Krita

Brushes 3 **Price** Free

Rating ★★★

Watercolour is nearly impossible to recreate digitally, as Jack freely admits, so instead he's created brushes that work how he feels they should behave. Not updated, but worth downloading.
<https://bit.ly/3lkquep>



Photoshop Environment

Artist Syntetyc

Software Photoshop

Brushes 90+ **Price** Free

Rating ★★★★★

A fantastic set that enables fine edge work across retouching and painting. With over 90 brushes for free, this is essential for any Photoshop user and can be adapted for other applications.
<https://bit.ly/4IIXeMV>



Starter Brush Pack 2025

Artist Marc Brunet

Software Photoshop,

Clip Studio Paint

Brushes 18 **Price** Free

Rating ★★★★★

These earn five stars because they come with an excellent instructional video and Marc continues to add more brushes. A great all-round set, and also compatible with Clip Studio Paint.
<https://bit.ly/4IISo2I>

VERDICT

When it's viewed as a fully comprehensive evening class to be completed over a couple of months, this represents exceptional value. But for those seeking a fast how-to, it's best avoided. If you have an Udemy subscription and want to learn anatomy properly, it's definitely worth investigating.

Pros

- Comprehensive approach to teaching
- Wide range of resources included
- Revised in 2022

Cons

- Could be too sprawling for many
- Requires significant time commitment

Rating

★★★★★

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Traditional Artist

Inspiration and advice from the best pro artists



This issue:

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Discover this month's selection of the finest traditional art, which has been sent in by you!

92 Mix mediums for powerful images

Carlos Cabrera walks through his hybrid workflow featuring watercolour, markers and more.

98 First Impressions: Primary Hughes

Why the limits of traditional art and plein-air working bring joy to the painter and professor.

FXPosé

SHOWCASING THE FINEST TRADITIONAL ARTISTS



Jim Mahfood

LOCATION: US **MEDIA:** Pen, ink, watercolour, spray paint, colour pencil

WEB: www.jimmahfood.com

Jim has been a freelance artist for 28 years, amassing a global cult following. His notable projects include character design work for Into the Spider-Verse.



1 GODZILLA'S MONSTERPIECE THEATRE #1 VARIANT

"Godzilla is so fun to draw! I had a blast with this one. A variant cover for my buddy Tom Sciolì's amazing Godzilla's Monsterpiece Theatre comic book for IDW."



2 RED ROOM: CRYPTO KILLAZ #3 COVER

"This is a variant cover I did for the late Ed Piskor's incredible horror splatterpunk book Red Room, which was published by Fantagraphics."

3 SEWER BOYZ 2 PIN-UP

"Sewer Boyz 2 is a big group of artists redrawing and remixing the legendary Giant Size X-Men book from 1975. This was a pin-up that I created for the book."

4 FEAR AND LOATHING IN LAS VEGAS #1 COVER

"I'm a huge fan of Hunter S. Thompson and Ralph Steadman, so this was quite a cool cover to take on. I was really channelling those Gonzo vibes!"





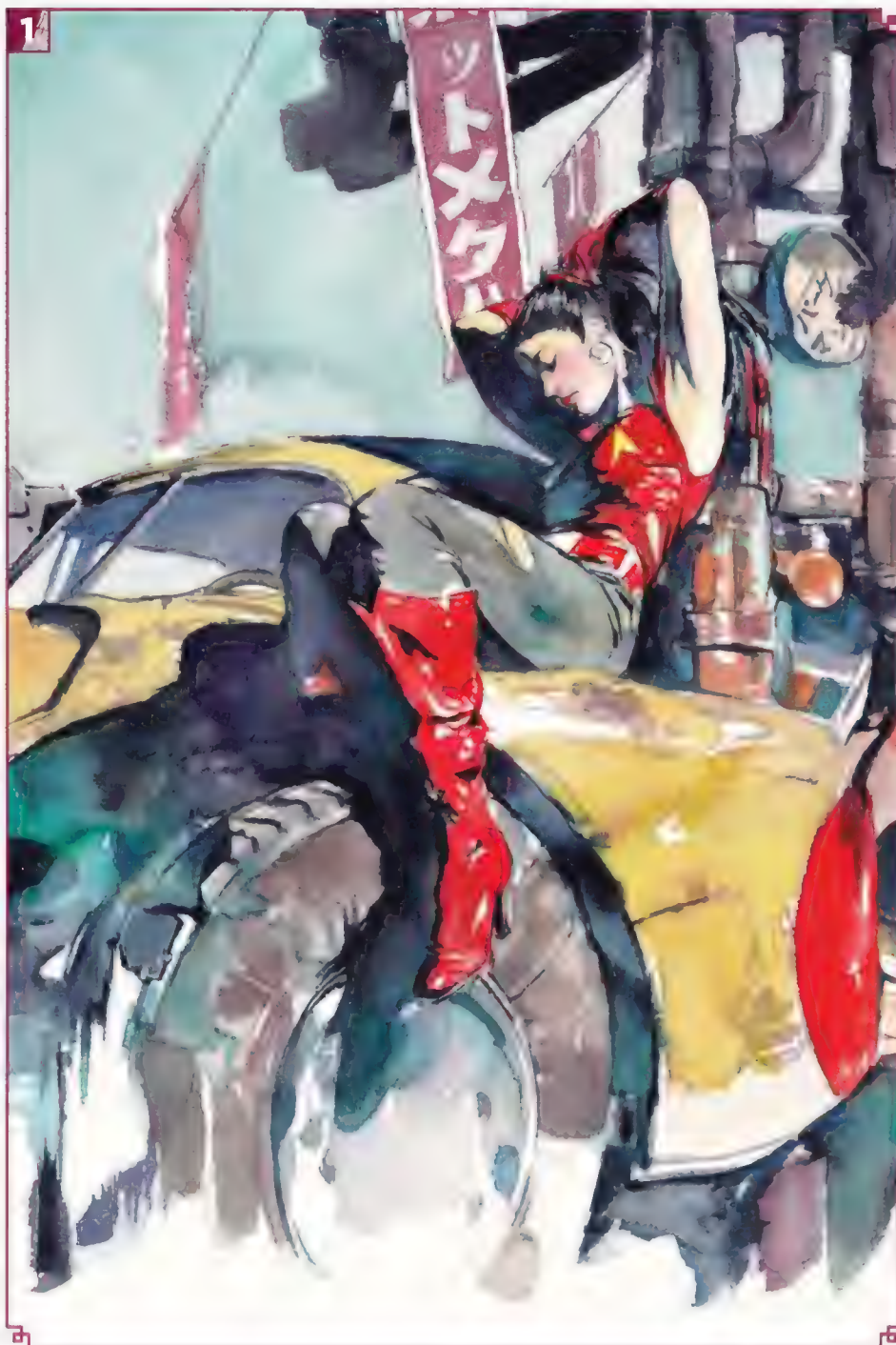
Ito Omura

LOCATION: Japan **MEDIA:** Watercolour, airbrush, oil **WEB:** www.itoscaresme.shop

Ito is a comic book artist best known for his Asian-themed watercolour comic covers. He began his career in 2018 as a storyboard artist in LA and has collaborated with Skybound Entertainment on G.I. Joe covers.

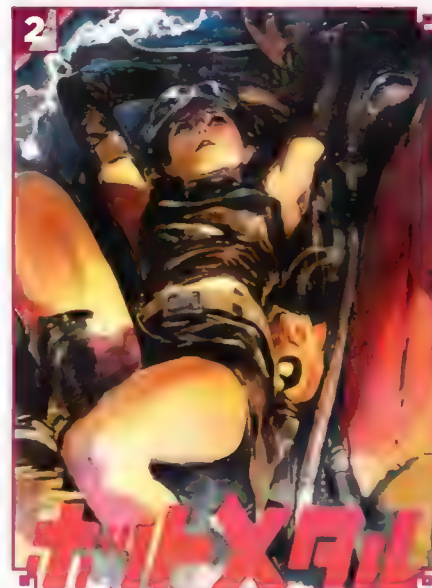
1 SCRAPYARD

"Visions of scrap and relaxation. In this piece, the soft forms of the figure contrast against the environment."



2 MECHANIC VOL. 1

"The words in this personal magazine concept say 'Hot-Metal'. The inspiration came from Heavy Metal magazine."



3 BRUCE, SUSHI CHEF

"This piece was inspired by traditional visions of smokey izakaya taverns and midnight dining in Japan."

4 DEADPOOL, SWEET POTATO VENDOR

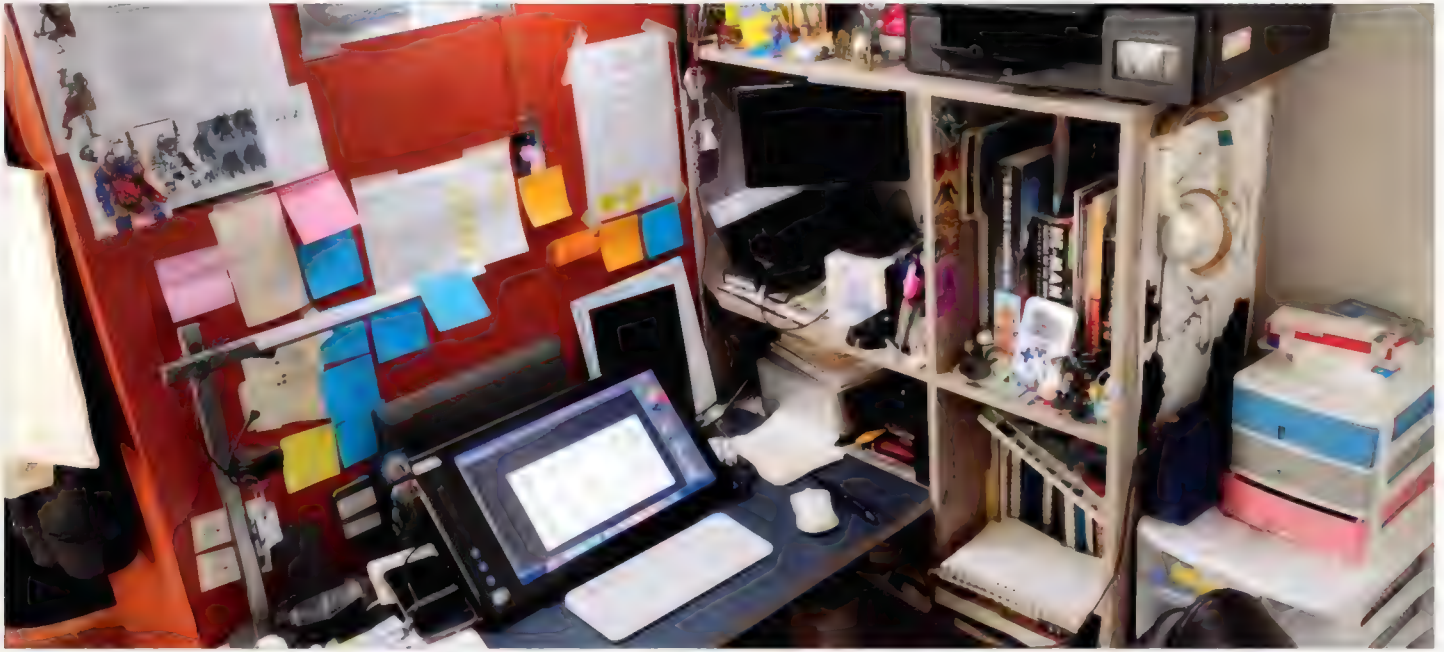
"These vendors in Japan are often seen serving late-night patrons, albeit with more organised vans than this!"





Want to see more like this? Check out Carlos' action-packed science fiction comic project Riptide Fighters
<https://bit.ly/4IFPYRR>





Markers

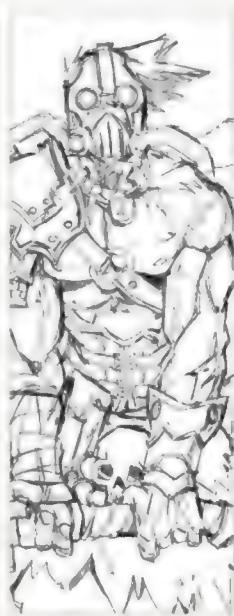
Watercolour

MIX MEDIUMS FOR POWERFUL IMAGES

Illustrator **CARLOS CABRERA** shares his hybrid technique for using markers, watercolour and brush pens to get rich, layered results

Over my 25-year career, I've always moved between digital and traditional tools. Not because one is better, but because combining them keeps me engaged, fast and curious. When I paint, I look for impact first: strong values, bold shapes and expressive brushwork that pops visually and gives the piece clarity and presence.

In this tutorial, I'll show you how I take a digital sketch and turn it into a finished traditional artwork using affordable, accessible materials and a mixed-media workflow. You'll learn to go from loose greyscale values all the way up to a layered and colourful final render that uses a combination of markers, acrylic brush pens and watercolour paints.



I like to treat affordable traditional materials like Photoshop layers. I start by printing my digital sketch on watercolour paper, then block in values using Touch Twin Markers. Once the structure is solid, I'll use watercolour for colour washes – thin layers with minimal water – and build them up like digital overlays. With cheap acrylic brush markers we'll lift volumes with white or subtle tones, then glaze over those areas again in watercolour. It's a fast, intuitive process that lets me build texture and light while staying loose.

One key takeaway is that you don't need to use fancy gear to make your art sing. The results are strong because of the approach; thinking in layers, committing to lighting, and letting tools surprise me.

I also believe in the power of the unexpected. I use my fingers to smudge paint, let the water do weird things on paper and don't try to control every edge. It's about finding a sense of life and momentum.

By the end of this tutorial, you'll have seen the full journey from sketch to final, with all the chaos, problem-solving and texture that comes with it. If you're a digital artist looking to get your hands dirty or a traditional painter who wants to speed up their process, this hybrid method might open new doors.



Carlos Cabrera is a concept artist and illustrator with more than 25 years in the industry. He's worked with Marvel, DC, Ubisoft, Riot Games, and more. <https://cabrerabrothers.com>

MATERIALS

PAPER

■ Canson watercolour sheet, acid-free

MARKERS

■ ShinHan Touch Twin, Cool Grey 1, 3, and 5

■ Generic alcohol markers, dark grey and neutral tones
■ White acrylic brush markers

PAINT

■ Sakura Koi watercolours

■ Student-grade watercolour tubes

MISCELLANEOUS

■ Masking tape

■ Flat brush

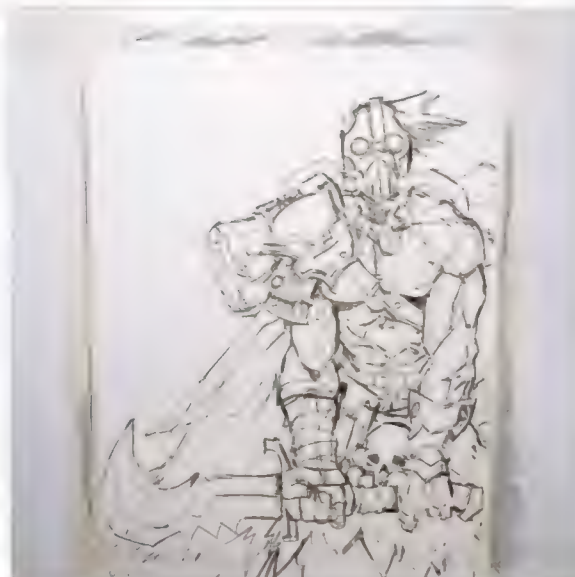
■ Round brush

■ Water for glaze only



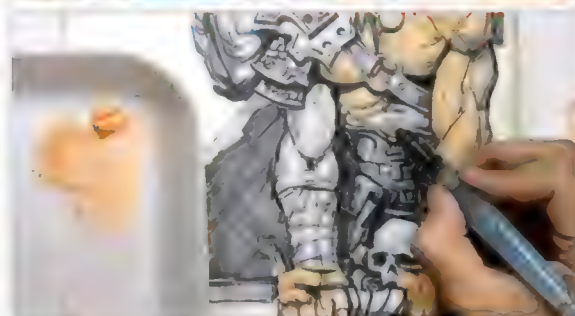
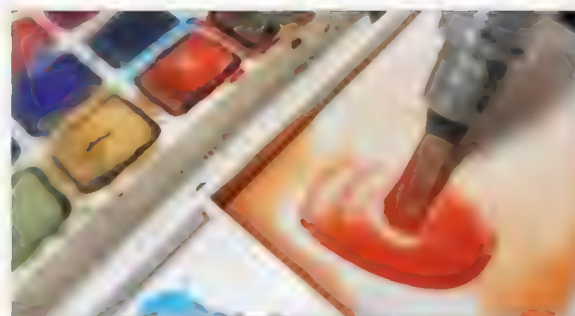
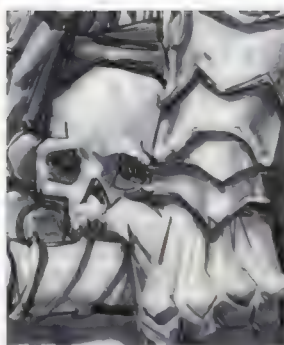
1 Draw a digital sketch

Start by sketching digitally using your usual tools and setup. This stage is about capturing the silhouette, composition and rhythm of the piece. My character is a mutant warrior with a cloak and mechanical elements, so I focus on balancing organic and hard-surface design. Don't overwork the lines, leave just enough information to print. Mood is key, and I'm aiming for mystery and tension. I use Photoshop and a basic brush to establish a quick sketch with just the lines and no shading.



2 Print and tape the image

I print my digital sketch on a 9 x 12in Canson watercolour sheet. As the paper is on the thinner side, I tape it firmly on all sides using masking tape to prevent buckling when it gets wet. This step is often overlooked, but it makes a huge difference later on. It also helps to preserve a clean edge that makes for nice presentation. Once dry, the paper will stay flat as if it was never wet – that's the whole point of this step!

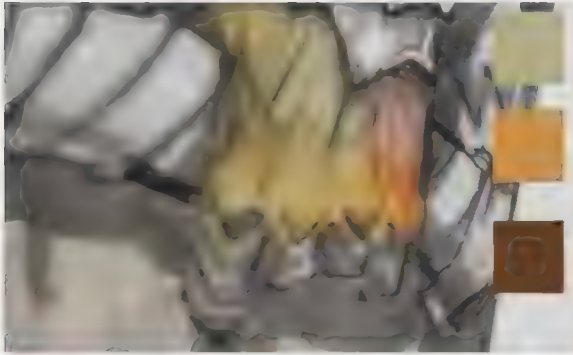


4 Apply thin watercolour washes

Begin layering subtle colour using a barely damp brush. These first washes are transparent and serve to shift the overall temperature of the piece. Use a mix of cool and warm tones depending on the area; blues in the shadows, and warmer ochres on skin or cloth. Don't try to render, just stain the drawing and create a base colour mood. I use a mix of Sakura's Koi watercolours and cheaper tubes, and prefer to avoid rounded student palettes as the pigment often dries dull.

3 Put down the initial greys

For the value pass in my image, I used ShinHan Touch Twin markers in Cool Grey 1, 3 and 5. These alcohol-based markers are perfect for laying down smooth transitions and blocking in the volume, but any alcohol-based marker works well here, even Copics. Treat this like a monochrome underpainting, thinking in terms of form, structure and lighting. Avoid rendering every detail and instead focus on the light direction, shadow patterns and contrast between planes. Using quick and confident strokes makes this my favourite part of the process.



5 Carefully add a colour glaze

Once the light washes are dry, go in with more pigmented watercolour using a medium round brush. Glaze over certain areas with thin layers of more saturated colour, being careful not to reactivate underlying pigments. This is like a colour layer in Photoshop, adjusting warmth, hue and value subtly while keeping the marker values visible. Depending on my goal, I may stop here for a more graphic, comic-style look.



6 Lift with white

I use white acrylic brush markers from a cheap 48-pack to start adding highlights. I love these kinds of markers because I have a lot of control with the brush tip. I keep it soft and controlled, focusing on areas that catch the most light; edges of the mask, metal parts and the top of the shoulder. These markers don't give solid opacity in one pass, but that's actually useful – we can layer slowly and control the intensity of each highlight.



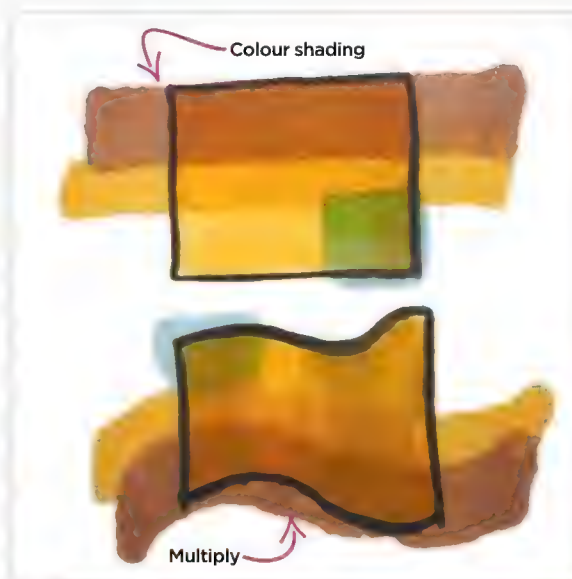
7 Overlay the colour again

Once the white areas dry, glaze watercolour on top to tint the highlights. This helps them integrate with the local colour and creates subtle colour variation, like bouncing warm light on skin or cool glints on metal. It also tones down harsh white marks and keeps the image cohesive. Depending on the brand, overlays can be vivid or slightly dull. The key is finding balance between your materials. ➤



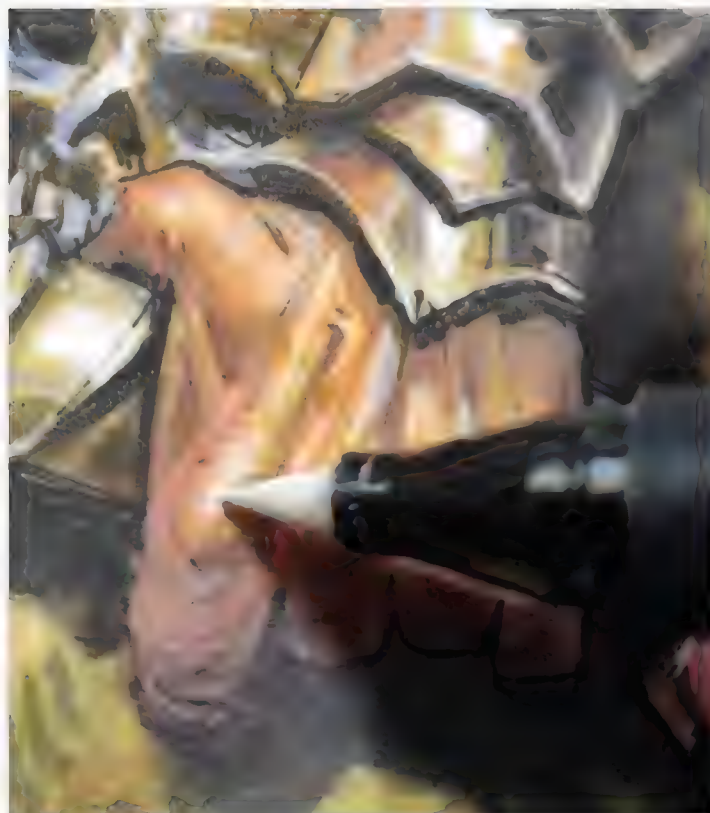
8 Smudge for more detail

Use your fingers or a rag to smudge wet edges or soften transitions. This adds randomness and breaks symmetry, especially in the background or along cast shadows. It also gives a bit of analogue texture, which appears less stiff than brushstrokes. Sometimes I like to lift the colour intentionally to create textures. Your fingers are the most underrated tool, and sometimes I even use my palm or different materials to create the texture that I'm after.



9 Watercolour shading

You can use cheap alcohol markers in neutral tones to deepen shadows and block out large shapes like a cloak or background elements. These markers blend smoothly over watercolour and help to reinforce form. Treat this pass as a way to re-establish strong darks and separate the figure from the background. I only do this if the piece calls for it – sometimes watercolour is enough, but alcohol markers deliver punch quickly.



10 Final push on the highlights

Let's go back to our acrylic markers, but this time with more precision. Target rim lights, edge reflections and focal points. This is one of the last chances to bring contrast and punch to the piece, so be careful about placement. It also helps to guide the eye and emphasise form. If I need maximum opacity I'll switch to gouache, but acrylic markers or paint usually do this job best.



11 *Make any necessary tweaks to the colours*

Assess the image as a whole and glaze over any areas that need colour balance. For example, you might warm up the skin by layering transparent red or orange, or cool down shadows with blues or violets. This gives variety and keeps surfaces from feeling too flat. You could also use this stage to soften or push shapes. On this piece, I used rusty tones on metal, skin tones and the sword, just playing freely.



12 *Let the image dry flat and make adjustments*

Once you're happy with the paint, let the piece dry naturally while still taped down. This could take several hours depending on how wet it got during the glazes. The masking tape prevents warping and keeps the edges clean. It's important not to rush as removing the tape too soon can ruin the finish. Never use a hair dryer because it stresses the

paper; just let it sit and come back later. I'll often notice things I missed after stepping away. For my piece, I returned to my Touch Twin Markers for one last pass, reinforcing the key shadows and punching up core edges. This sharpens the silhouette and helps to guide the viewer's attention. I also unify areas where the watercolour dried unevenly and might add fine lines – you can use any waterproof ink for this.



13 *Remove the tape*

Carefully peel off the tape, pulling it slowly and at a low angle to avoid tearing the paper. It's satisfying to see the clean border emerge, which gives the piece a professional, framed feel. This is when you can finally step back and look at the whole work. I used to rush this part, but now I enjoy it as the moment of closure. ●

First Impressions

✧ Primary Hughes ✧

How the painter and professor embraces traditional limits



Where did your artistic journey start?
Like a lot of people, as a kid, painting with Bob Ross and drawing

from dinosaur books. I took all the art classes I could and participated in summer youth programs at Kent State University where I'd eventually earn bachelor's and master's degrees in visual communication design.

What's your main inspiration?

Most artists are observers and I'm no different. If I'm talking with someone, I'm also drawing their face or thinking about what paint I'd mix for their skin tones. In my portrait paintings, I explore identity, beauty and transformation through a melding of the human form with floral or abstract elements.

Is making a living as an artist all you thought it would be?

More complex than I imagined. It's rewarding to have a life full of art as a practitioner and a professor, but often uncertain and demanding in ways that go beyond just making art. There are moments and periods



TOURMALINE

Created for the Re-Emergent solo show at Modern Eden Gallery. It blends a stylised silhouette and layered pattern to evoke historical elegance and dreamlike identity.

“The finality of traditional mediums doesn't restrict creativity, but sharpens it”



REGENCY

This figure carries magic through the forest, where danger stirs and purpose takes form. Made for Character in Context at the A.R. Mitchell Museum.

REGENCY

Layered motifs and harmonised colours reveal the figure's bond with the woods and suggest deep understanding of forest magic.

– like with the current omnipresent threat of AI – when the future can feel unclear. Sometimes the most hopeful act is choosing to keep going, even without a clear map.

If you were starting out now, what advice would you most appreciate?

Think of every bad drawing like a brick on the path to becoming a great artist. You need a lot of them to build the road. Don't worry about being perfect, just keep laying bricks and you'll get where you're going.

Are there any challenges working traditionally over digitally?

Within the digital world, the sheer volume of tools, layers and endless undo options can be paralysing. The infinite choice can dilute intention.

Traditional painting requires me to be present. The materials have limits, and within those limits I find clarity. There's an honesty in having to make decisions that can't easily be undone. That finality doesn't restrict creativity, but sharpens it.

Do you stick to a single medium?

I've naturally developed a pattern of using different media for different subjects. Some of it is practical, like using acrylics in the studio to avoid solvent exposure. I've also built a strong body of acrylic portrait work and I'm committed to developing that focus. For plein-air painting, I use oils since outdoor airflow makes the process safer. While for figure drawing and life studies, I turn to pastel and charcoal for immediacy and responsiveness.

The analytical side of me thrives on this compartmentalisation; each medium has a place and purpose. That said, as a professor I remain flexible and enjoy using mixed-media for low-stakes, playful work.

Do you have a passion project?

During summer I'm an active plein-air painter. So far, I've created more than 150 oil paintings of Presque Isle Park, a rugged stretch of Lake Superior coastline in Michigan.

While painting on location, I try to capture how light, colour and atmosphere combine and reveal the true feeling of a place. These pieces hold more meaning for me than any photo or souvenir. They're shaped by deliberate observation and the feeling of standing still while the world around me moves.

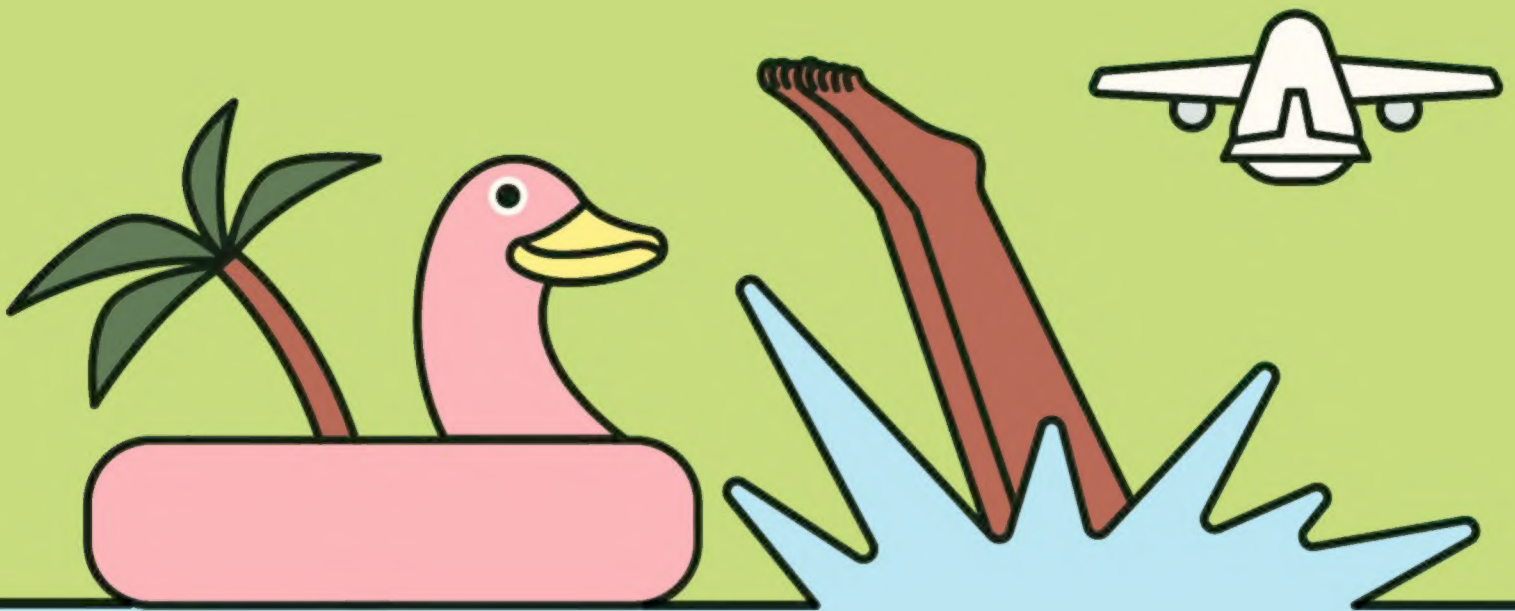
Presque Isle has become such a part of my practice that, even in the studio, I often paint from those memories, hoping a warm breeze might guide my hand.

Primary Hughes is a Michigan-based painter and professor known for vibrant acrylic portraits and plein-air landscapes that explore light, colour and the quiet emotional weight of reflection and resolve. www.primaryhughes.com

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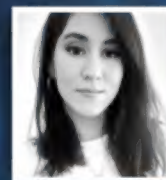
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“The goal is to capture a moment with your character in motion”

Fernanda Suarez



See page 58 for our expert guide to painting this cover

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